

MONTGOMERY

KENT BARSTOW: SPACE MAN

RUTHERFORD MONTGOMERY

KENT BARSTOW:

SPACE MAN



DUELL,
SLOAN
and
PEARCE



A. ORBAN

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"Rutherford Montgomery has a facile pen when it comes to writing for boys, and his Kent Barstow stories have been especially well received by young readers."—Paul Zankowich, *Education*

KENT BARSTOW: SPACE MAN

by Rutherford Montgomery

The hottest jet pilot of them all, Captain Kent Barstow of the United States Air Force, is tapped for emergency duty, beginning with a speedy course of astronaut training. Not included in this training program is the strange girl he meets on a plane—is she as innocent as she seems? . . . and who is the mysterious voyager in space? Captain Barstow's job is to intercept the unidentified spaceship and find out.

Jacket design by Albert Orbaan



KENT BARSTOW

Space Man

.

By Rutherford Montgomery

KENT BARSTOW: SPECIAL AGENT

MISSILE AWAY, *a Kent Barstow Adventure*

MISSION INTRUDER, *a Kent Barstow Adventure*

KENT BARSTOW: SPACE MAN

TOM PITTMAN, USAF

JETS AWAY

OUT OF THE SUN

WAR WINGS

THUMBS UP

BEAVER WATER

CARCAJOU

WAPITI THE ELK

MOUNTAIN MAN

HILL RANCH

The Golden Stallion series

A HORSE FOR CLAUDIA AND DENNIS (*with Natlee Kenoyer*)

RUTHERFORD MONTGOMERY

KENT BARSTOW

Space Man

.

DUELL, SLOAN AND PEARCE

New York

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DICK CLARK

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KENT BARSTOW
Space Man

1. ASTRONAUT

Kent Barstow, Captain, USAF, sat in his parked sports car and relaxed. He was barely conscious of the airmen and officers entering and leaving the Aero Medical Laboratory building. His thoughts were on the last of twenty-five tests he had taken over a period of time. They had been psychological tests, and the last one had a formidable title, Guilford-Zimmerman Spatial Visualization test. Actually it had been one of the simpler tests for Barstow. It was concerned with being able to see things in space.

Kent had known the significance of the tests before taking them. No order had been issued forcing him to take them. He had been offered the chance and had volunteered without hesitation. He smiled thinly as he reached forward to turn the ignition key and start the engine. Before pulling away from the curb, he looked up at the blue sky overhead. The convertible's top was down so that he had a fine view of the sweeping dome above him..His eyes probed beyond a towering thunderhead to the west. Space! If he passed those tests, would he one day be up there orbiting the earth? No one had suggested this might happen. The Aero Medics who had tested him had asked a thousand questions, had even asked many about how he would wish to travel into space, but they had

promised nothing. Others were being tested; not all would have a chance at the great adventure.

Escape, he thought, and the thin smile widened into a grin as he swung the sports car away from the curb. He would not only escape from the earth's air and gravity; he would also escape from Q X-B.1. AFCIN, where promotions were notoriously slow in coming. It hardly seemed possible that Colonel Jefferys, head of Special Intelligence, would have a space mission on his mind. Outer space seemed an unlikely place for saboteurs and foreign agents.

Kent Barstow knew that he had the qualifications for a space man. He was a veteran jet pilot as well as an engineer with a lot of mathematics to his credit. He had tested the hottest of the jets accepted by the Air Force. He was aware that the air age was moving swiftly toward the space age. Like hundreds of other jet pilots, he wanted to be a part of the great adventure when the time arrived for flight into space.

He parked his car at the Bachelor Officers' Quarters and got out. It would be good to relax for a few days. The long period of testing had been rugged. He climbed the steps and walked up one flight of stairs to his room.

A shower and a fresh shirt and uniform were the first steps toward the relaxation he wanted. He undressed quickly. When he was under the shower with the needle-sharp jets of water stinging his back, he started to hum a snatch of a tune. He wondered where he would be assigned. Any place would be better than his last three assignments with Special Intelligence. They had been hair-raising adventures. His skull had been almost cracked while on a case at Edwards Air Force Base.

He was groping for the soap when the phone rang. Stepping out of the shower stall, he pawed along the wall until his hands found a towel. He wiped water out of his eyes and moved out into the room. The phone was on a desk beside his bed. Kent seated himself on the towel and reached for the receiver. The angry rattle of the phone stopped abruptly.

“Hello, Captain Barstow speaking.”

A grim frown formed on Kent’s face as he heard the clipped voice at the other end of the line.

“Jefferys,” the voice said. “Tomorrow at ten.”

Kent knew better than to ask any questions. He was at Wright-Patterson AFB in Ohio, but he knew he’d be in Room 304 in the Pentagon in Washington at exactly ten o’clock the next morning.

“Yes, sir,” he answered crisply, and before the last word was spoken he heard the receiver click into place in Room 304. Jefferys was like that. He wasted no words.

Kent cradled the receiver and sat on the damp towel, staring at the wet tracks he had made on the floor. He had to report in, but he didn’t have to accept the assignment Jefferys was sure to offer unless it turned out to be something routine like checking for Security on some individual. He didn’t dislike Jefferys; in fact, he admired the tough head man, and was a bit in awe of him. To the head of AFCIN, men were expendable if the stakes were high enough. They always were when the chief took a hand personally.

Kent got to his feet and started drying himself. He had lost all desire for the luxury of soaping himself and finishing his shower. He glanced at his wrist watch lying on the desk.

The time was exactly 3 P.M. He was sure that transportation awaited him on the flight line. It would carry Jefferys' scrawled signature.

Stepping to his window, he looked down on his sports car and shook his head. The red speedster, like himself, had no home. Now it would have a brief or a long stay in Ohio. He turned away from the window and started dressing.

He didn't put on the fresh shirt and uniform, but got back into the same ones he had worn that morning. He scowled at his reflection in the mirror as he knotted his tie. You couldn't escape from Jefferys, not as long as you delivered. His close pal, Major Spud Murphy, had tried to escape by taking test-pilot training at Edwards AFB in California. The day he had graduated, Jefferys had yanked him off the base and teamed him up with Kent on Mission Intruder where they had been shot at and knocked over the head by thugs.

"With that guy you can't just live a little bit dangerously," he said to his reflection.

Kent packed his flight bag, then glanced around the room to make sure he wasn't leaving anything. The glance wasn't necessary; he had been packing hurriedly for years so he was an expert at assembling his things. He put on his cap carefully and picked up his bag.

At the check-out desk below a girl with very blond hair gave him a friendly smile.

"Did you finish up, Captain?" she asked as she reached into a file for his slip.

Kent returned the smile. Carrie Williams had been stationed at March Field when he was there flying B-47 bombers.

"I'm finished," he said, and thought wryly that his space dream was also finished. "How would you like to have a red sports car to drive for a while?" he asked.

Carrie's eyes widened. "Yours?" she asked, trying not to show her eagerness.

Kent nodded. "I'm flying out today. The car is yours for as long as I'm tied up. Could be a few days or even a few weeks."

"I'd love it, but I might bang it up." She hesitated doubtfully.

"See if you can get a replacement for a half-hour. You can drive me to Operations and bring the car back." He smiled at her reassuringly.

"I'm a lucky girl." Carrie jumped to her feet and hurried through a back door.

Kent signed his room slip and, almost before he had finished, Carrie was back with a slim dark girl beside her. "Ella, meet Captain Kent Barstow," Carrie said.

Ella smiled. "He looks like an angel, not a captain," she said. "I'm Carrie's roommate, and I'll get to ride in that beauty of a car."

"Fine," Kent said as he bent to pick up his flight bag.

The drive to Operations took only ten minutes. Kent got out of the car and pulled his flight bag from the back compartment. "Wait until I check in. I may have an hour or so to kill. If I do, we'll have coffee and pie."

Kent entered the building and dropped his bag at a counter. The officer back of the counter was Major Erickson. Their paths had crossed many times. Erickson smiled at Kent.

"You go VIP these days, Barstow," he said. "We have a T-bird and a jockey waiting for you. You can hop off in ten minutes." Erickson was curious, but he knew what branch of the service Kent was in and was sure he'd not get a straight answer to any questions.

"Ten will be enough," Kent said. "I'll step out and tell my driver not to wait."

The airman who checked flight-line passes grinned. He had seen Carrie out in Kent's car. Kent went to the door and called to Carrie.

"Taking off in ten minutes. Have fun with the car." He lifted a hand before turning back into the room. Carrie blew him a kiss. As he turned away, he heard the growl of the sports car's engine. He walked back to the counter and handed the airman his flight-line pass.

The airman looked at it carefully before handing it back. "All clear, Captain," he said.

Eight minutes later Kent was suited up and climbing into a T-bird. The pilot of the jet trainer was a young second lieutenant named Noel Madden. He looked Kent over with more than just a casual glance.

"Kent Barstow," he said. "Heard about you."

"I get around," Kent said. "Ready for take-off?"

Madden nodded and they settled down for the usual preliminaries before take-off. The T-33 was a highly versatile trainer capable of speeds up to six hundred miles per hour with a ceiling of forty-five thousand feet and a range beyond a thousand miles. Kent remembered when he had first flown this modified version of an F-80.

Madden taxied out on the line and got his clearance. The T-bird slid down the runway and soared up and around, pointing her nose toward Washington. Kent settled back to consider sourly what sort of mission Jefferys would toss at him.

2. MISSION IN SPACE

Colonel Jeffreys looked exactly the same as he had several months before when Kent had last seen the chief. If he ever relaxed, Kent had never caught him at it. He watched Kent cross the floor to his desk out of cold gray eyes. He had a blackened pipe clenched in his teeth which he removed and laid in a messy ash tray among ashes and matchsticks.

“Good of you to drop in,” he greeted Kent dryly.

It was the exact greeting Jefferys always used to open a conference. Kent just nodded, then sat down in a chair beside the desk. There was discipline in the Special Intelligence but little formality, though it was natural to say “sir” when speaking to the colonel.

“Perhaps you have been wondering who steered you into tests for space travel.” Jefferys lifted an eyebrow just a little.

Kent stared at Jefferys blankly. His mind was usually agile, but the implication of the colonel’s words was too much for him.

“I did,” Jefferys said.

“Why?” Kent asked. “There couldn’t be any enemies up there.”

“That has to be proved,” Jefferys answered, and his voice

took on the clipped sharpness he always used when coming to the point.

"You want me to go up and see?" The idea was so impossible that Kent laughed.

Jefferys did not even smile. "If you will," he said.

"I would if I could," Kent said. He knew Jefferys was coldly in earnest, but the whole thing was so fantastic that he found it difficult to accept seriously.

"You can," Jefferys said. "Of course there will be some unknown factors, but the space capsule has been tested. Problems which were thought to be far from solution have been solved."

Kent leaned forward. A great eagerness was building up inside him. It was bound to come. The break-through had been made sooner than anyone outside a small circle expected.

"This capsule can be steered back to earth like the X-15?" he asked.

"Yes. And it can be steered in space. That is one of the big break-throughs," Jefferys answered.

Kent nodded. He knew that a space ship or a satellite would have little military value unless it was maneuverable. He also knew that satellites and orbiting space capsules followed a trajectory which could not be changed.

"What will I be looking for?" Kent asked.

"There is a space station orbiting the earth. Its launching was not announced. Its signals cannot be jammed or intercepted, probably because it is using a sunlight communication system." Jefferys' voice was grim.

"It must be orbiting at more than five hundred miles above

the earth where there is only a trace of air," Kent said thoughtfully.

"Six hundred miles," Jefferys said. "But it appears certain that this space ship has maneuverability because its altitude has been checked at much less distance."

Kent's brow furrowed in thought. "It could avoid the hot upper layers of radiation if it can be steered."

"What we want to know is whether this space station is manned and whether it is loaded with nuclear war heads." Jefferys stared at Kent, his gray eyes flint hard.

"You think it possible for a man to go up and find out those things?" Kent asked.

"Yes." Jefferys picked up his pipe and started jabbing ashes out of it with a pencil. "Even if he did not return we have a communication system which would allow him to report by Morse code or by voice." Jefferys stopped jabbing and reached for his humidor of tobacco.

Kent watched the lean, strong fingers close on the polished humidor. A small chill ran along his spine. The man across the desk would lay the cards on the table, coldly, without emotion. The important thing with him was that the man overtake the space station and report back. If the space station was armed and able to destroy the man, Jefferys would be sorry but he would not feel any guilt because he had weighed the terrible threat this space station could pose to his country, and could consider one man as nothing compared to the lives of a whole nation. Jefferys scooped into the humidor with his pipe.

"I am assured that a one-man capsule will have greater maneuverability than a space station and should have a chance

to survive.” He slid a finger into his jacket pocket and fished out a kitchen match which he scratched on his heel. Kent watched the yellow flame curve down over the pipe bowl as Jefferys drew hard. Through a cloud of smoke, he fixed Kent with his hard stare.

“Will you take this mission, Barstow?” he asked.

Kent stared back at the colonel. This was not the first time Jefferys had asked him to risk his life. Each time he had said yes. But at the moment his imagination was soaring far from the confines of Room 304. He was roused by the sharp click of the humidor as Jefferys set it back in its place. He let a half-smile form on his lips.

“The first man in the USAF into space,” he said softly. “Perhaps the first man in the world into space.” He straightened and said. “Yes, I’ll go, sir.”

Not a trace of change came over Jefferys’ face. It was as though he had known from the beginning that Kent would accept.

“There is need for fast action, but in order to insure success there are certain things you must know about the craft you’ll handle and how to handle it.” He fished for another kitchen match. The long speech had allowed the fire in the rough-cut tobacco to die out. Before scratching the match, he added, “All of this must be done in absolute secrecy. Unfortunately much is known about this project by alien agents.”

“They got past us?” Kent asked, knowing this would be a sore spot with Jefferys.

“You read about two men defecting a few months ago, Walters and Golden,” Jefferys said dryly. “Both had access to information.”

"How much could they know?" Kent asked.

"That at the moment we have only one space capsule ready to go and only a few men who are trained for space flight." He raked the match across his heel sharply.

Kent gave him a thin smile. "I'm a ringer you are slipping in. Not one of the team."

"That's right. The others have all gotten publicity, pictures in magazines and newspapers. You will be sent in as a technical adviser." Jefferys relighted his pipe with the matchstick burned down close to his fingers.

"We've tried that before," Kent said skeptically.

"This time it could work. We are sure no one knew you took those tests," Jefferys said.

"No one except everybody at Wright-Patterson AFB," Kent answered sourly.

Jefferys frowned. "That is a chance you take. You've come through before even though they knew you were operating. You're trained and experienced at outwitting them. Those other men do not have such training."

Kent grinned. "Where do I report to?"

"I am sure they'll expect us to send the craft off from Canaveral so we'll launch from Vandenberg. You will report to San Francisco at once. That's where the mission starts."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow." Jefferys leaned back. "Nothing in writing or through channels on your flight to Vandenberg. I realize that if they know where you go, things are apt to happen."

"MATS?" Kent asked. Military Air Transport was to his way of thinking the least noticeable, least easily checked of any sort of flight.

Jefferys shook his head. "That would make it official. You go civilian on a 707 jet air liner to San Francisco International."

"Space has been reserved?" Kent asked.

"At United Air Lines desk. You called in several days ago and got a reservation under the name of George Mason. Flight time is eleven o'clock. Be there like any other tourist twenty minutes before flight time." Jefferys got to his feet and thrust out a hand when Kent rose. "Good luck. Report as usual and through usual channels. On anything you can't handle get to me personally."

They shook hands, and Kent left. He had to hurry if he was to get together civilian clothing and bags. As he waited for a taxi in the ramp below the Pentagon, he stepped out into the sunshine and looked up at the sky. When he looked down he saw his shadow on the cement, and that reminded him that from now on he must be wary, always watching for a shadow in the form of a human being, always alert for an ambush. They had tried before, and would be apt to try again unless he was careful.

3. A DATE IS SET

Nicol Pardin was an agricultural attaché according to his embassy listing. He worked at his job with admirable diligence especially when it took him to a place where there was a missile base or any other form of military establishment. He and his assistants had researched semitropical fruit growing in Florida and citrus growing in California. Such bases as Edwards, located in a barren desert area, had given Pardin a lot of trouble. He had finally announced he was seeking a thornless cactus which could be introduced to arid regions and grown for stock food.

Pardin sat in his office in Washington and tapped a foot impatiently on the floor. His confidential dispatches from the home secretary had been read and duly flushed down the drain in his private washroom. Orders from his government had been urgent and couched in ominous language. The home office had finally got around to assigning to him for elimination a man who had twice baffled the best hatchet men his government had in the United States. He rested his pudgy arms on his desk and stared at an Agriculture Department bulletin. The title of the bulletin indicated it had to do with the control of mealy bugs. Pardin picked up a pencil and poked the bulletin aside. A snapshot was revealed. It was a

three-by-five-inch blowup of a thirty-five-millimeter photograph. Pardin stared at the picture of an Air Force captain who was in the act of leaving a red sports car. The photograph was in color and showed a tall, well-built young man with a strong, serious countenance. Pardin flipped the photograph over with his pencil. Neatly lettered on the back were a few lines of information about the captain:

KENT BARSTOW
CAPTAIN USAF
Q X-B.1. AFCIN

Pardin laid aside the pencil and slipped the mealy-bug bulletin over on top of the picture. A thin smile curved his lips a fraction of an inch. Perhaps when he got home, he would write a bulletin on the extermination of Special Intelligence officers. It was a pleasant thing to think about and fitted his present mood. Pardin was a short man, five feet four inches with high-heeled shoes on small feet. He was pudgy, and his face was moon shaped, which allowed him to wear a benign expression to hide his thoughts and also to rouse confidence in unsuspecting people who might have information of interest to him.

His thoughts were interrupted by a tap on his door. The tap was followed by a gentle thump such as a closed fist would make. He spoke loudly. .

“Come in.”

The door opened and a girl entered. Her dark hair was cut short and did not appear ever to have seen the inside of a beauty parlor. As a matter of fact, Neeta Kristoff had just come from an expensive beauty salon. Pardin regarded her

with approval as she walked to the chair beside his desk. The first thing he looked for in a woman helper was brains, but he also liked beauty. In Neeta he had both. Her hips were small and boyish and her face was striking in its demure beauty. She sat down and primly fixed her skirt.

"The beautician was a very slow woman," she said, and her voice matched her slender attractiveness.

Pardin nodded. "Some things we do not control," he said. "You destroyed the message I sent?"

She nodded. "Gail Weatherby is always careful." She smiled at Pardin. "Do you think this Air Force captain will like Gail Weatherby?" Before he could answer, she added, "You pick rather nice names for me."

"And I have picked a very important job for you," Pardin said. He lifted the mealy-bug bulletin and picked up the photograph of Kent Barstow, handing it to her. "Here is your man. At the moment he is shopping for civilian clothing in Heffleman's Clothing Store."

Neeta Kristoff studied the picture carefully and as she stared at it, the demure look vanished. In its place there was a hardness highly accented by the glitter that came into her green eyes. Pardin frowned and leaned forward.

"Neeta Kristoff is showing," he said reprovingly. "It is all right here with me, but outside this room you must be Gail Weatherby, the sweet young thing."

Neeta laughed harshly and picked her handbag from the floor. She opened it and started to drop the picture inside. Pardin shook his head.

"I will take it," he said. "But first take another look. You

must be sure. When you see him he will be dressed as a civilian."

Neeta tossed the photograph on his desk. "I will be sure," she said. "What is the plan?"

"You will work with Kover and Elkins." He watched closely for her reaction.

"Kover," she said with distaste. "He is a pig without brains."

"A useful agent and an expendable one," Pardin said. "He will not annoy you."

She lifted her chin disdainfully. "I am glad he is expendable." She gave Pardin a level look. "How about Gail Weatherby?"

He gave her the bland look he used to hide his real thoughts. If she knew that she was as expendable as Kover she might not carry on, although she had been well trained and knew that any agent was less than nothing where the home office had a job they wanted done.

"Gail Weatherby is expendable, but not Neeta Kristoff," he said, his moon face beaming.

Neeta shrugged her shoulders. "How will it be done?" she asked abruptly.

"You will be furnished a curare kit. As soon as his destination is determined, the plan will be set in motion." Pardin pulled open a drawer of his desk and took a small box from it. The box was a medicine container such as would come from any drugstore. There was a label on it filled out in ink with scrawled writing. It would pass anywhere as a box of pills or powders. Pardin shoved it toward Neeta.

Neeta took the box. She dropped it into her handbag without opening it. She had been well skilled in the use of this deadly poison which killed after just a scratch from a fang-like needle, but she had never before been called upon to use curare.

"If I am caught there will be enough left for me?" She fixed her green eyes on Pardin.

"Enough, but do not get caught." Pardin spoke smoothly.

"If the plan is good, I won't get caught," Neeta said as she snapped her handbag shut and dropped it to the floor.

"His destination will most certainly be Canaveral or Vandenberg," Pardin said briskly. "Canaveral would be the most likely but many things have been going on at Vandenberg."

Neeta smiled. "San Francisco or Cocoa. Sounds like a vacation trip."

Pardin smiled. "He is going civilian, so that means a commercial air line. They're in a hurry, so he'll fly jet liner. That narrows down the choices. We have reservations on all jet flights to both places for this afternoon, tonight, and tomorrow."

"I am to tail him?" Neeta asked.

"No. That is being done. He will want to appear like any traveler so he'll report in and pick up his flight ticket at least twenty minutes before take-off time." Pardin smiled broadly.

"I will be notified." Neeta nodded her head.

"A fast car will rush you to the airport. You will be given the name of the girl whose reservation you are to pick up. Once aboard, you are on your own." Pardin tapped his fingernails on the desk top.

"If this does not come off?" Neeta asked.

“You will get in touch with Elkins and use a plan we have worked out for him.”

“This can be done before he boards or after he leaves the plane,” Neeta said thoughtfully. “If it’s done in flight, everyone aboard will be held.”

Pardin smiled broadly. “Before, yes, but not after landing. He will be met and might easily get away from you.” His smile vanished. “You are a clever enough operator to ditch a simple finger ring. And until there is an autopsy it will be thought he has had a stroke, a coronary attack.” He spread his hands. “A simple, foolproof plan.”

“I guess I’ll do it on the plane,” Neeta said. “It will be fun watching the fool’s reactions.”

“Run along and stay close to the phone in your room,” Pardin said. He leaned back and watched Neeta click across the floor. She did not look back when she opened the door. She was gone with a flare of her skirt.

Pardin sat and thought how much this would do for him with his boss. The big man was tough and ruthless, but he also rewarded a man for successfully handling a case. Yes, this should get him a promotion, perhaps a chance to join the small inner circle which dictated the policy of a nation.

4. JET TO NOWHERE

Kent Barstow was dressed in a gray flannel suit and was wearing a snap-brim hat. He had selected a figured shirt and a rather loud tie. It gave him some satisfaction to be able to wear a tie so far from regulation. His baggage was secondhand but solid cowhide. He had equipped himself with a ten-pound wholesale hardware catalogue which had leather handles like a brief case. George Mason would be a salesman if anyone should ask. He got out of the cab he had hired and waited for the driver to get his bag and catalogue. He paid the driver, tipping him generously. Before picking up the bag he glanced at his watch. He was the perfect traveler—just twenty minutes until take-off time.

He walked into the waiting room and headed for the United Air Lines counter. He slid his bag on the scales under the counter and set the catalogue on the floor. A bright young man back of the counter smiled and said:

“Can I help you, sir?”

“You have space for George Mason on Flight 126,” Kent answered.

The young man started checking, humming to himself. Kent looked around the waiting room casually. There were many people sitting waiting for the loud-speaker to call their

flights. They looked just the way people do at an airport, better-than-average groups, a little more prosperous-looking. A young mother with two small children, a middle-aged man with a brief case beside his chair, dozens of others waiting. But there could be one or two among them who were not casual travelers. People were coming and going. The young man's voice brought him back to what he was doing.

"Here you are. One way to San Francisco." He reached down and slid Kent's bag off the scales then tagged it, ripping loose the claim check which he stapled to Kent's ticket envelope.

Kent paid for the ticket and pocketed it, then picked up his catalogue and sauntered toward the magazine and tobacco stand. He didn't want a book for a flight which would last only a little more than four hours, but he did want to look around, to watch the people. He knew that if he was being followed it would be by a team he had never seen before or investigated. The enemy was as clever as he was deadly.

The small dark man Kent had spotted while at the ticket window was gone. He had left behind him a newspaper and quite a few cigarette butts poked down into a sand jar beside the chair where he had sat. Kent stared at the butts. The cork-wrapped filters were slightly soggy and looked as uninviting as discarded cigarette butts always do.

Kent shrugged his shoulders and turned away. The old feeling of being hunted had returned. For several months he had been free from it, but now it was back. He'd be looking over his shoulder, watching people, wary as a wild animal during hunting season from now on.

“Got a match, buddy?” a voice asked.

Kent suppressed an urge to whirl and face the speaker. He turned slowly and faced a young man in a sports shirt who had a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He smiled at the young man.

“I’m afraid not. I don’t smoke.”

The young man blinked and gave Kent a closer look. He shook his head and sauntered away. His manner showed that he was suspicious of anybody who didn’t smoke. Kent grinned and dismissed the young man from his mind. He just wasn’t the type to be an enemy agent. Or was there any type? He knew there wasn’t.

Kent wandered about for fifteen minutes, then sat down to wait for his flight call. He had to wait only a few minutes. He idly watched the late-comers hurrying to clear their tickets. A pretty young girl with dark hair rushed to the United counter and dropped two bags on the scale. She looked excited, probably her first flight across country. She got her ticket and was turning away from the counter as the loud-speaker called the flight.

“Flight one two six for San Francisco loading from Concourse Eight. All aboard, please.”

Kent joined the throng heading toward Concourse Eight. The dark-haired girl hurried along behind him. Kent moved in expertly, wanting to get aboard before the best seats were taken. He knew they would all be plushy and comfortable, but he liked one well forward on any liner.

There were plenty of seats available and he selected one after passing a space with a reserved card on the seat. Next to it sat an army corporal. Kent sat down and put his catalogue

between his feet. He saw the dark-haired girl enter and start down the aisle. The corporal saw her, too, and hastily removed the reserved sign, tucking it into the pocket ahead of him. He grinned hopefully at the girl, but she passed him by quickly. She hesitated at the vacant seat next to Kent.

"Is this seat taken?" she asked, and almost blushed.

"No," Kent said. He was pleased at the prospect of having the demure little girl as a seat companion.

She slid into the seat shyly and put her handbag on the floor between her feet. The NO SMOKING . . . FASTEN SEAT BELTS sign came on. Kent fastened his belt and glanced at the girl. She was looking straight ahead at the back of the seat before her. Kent said:

"Better fasten your seat belt."

"Oh," she said, and started fumbling with the belt.

"Allow me," Kent said, and reached over. He quickly fastened her belt. "It's just a precautionary thing," he explained.

"Thank you," she said, and glanced at him. "I'm Gail Weatherby."

"I'm George Mason," Kent answered. "Are you on vacation?"

"I'm going to visit my married sister in San Francisco." She smiled eagerly. "Do you ride on airplanes a lot?"

"Yes," Kent answered truthfully. "I sell builders' hardware, locks, doorknobs, and such things." He smiled, thinking it was silly to lie to this demure girl.

A large elderly woman had taken the seat next to the corporal and was trying to make conversation with him. He stared past her at Kent, a gloomy expression on his face.

A stewardess stopped for their tickets. The girl fumbled in her handbag for hers. Kent passed his over at once. After the stewardess had left, the girl sat looking at the passenger's ticket copy in her hand.

"Do I do anything with this?" she asked.

"If there's any business connected with the trip you can use it as income-tax deduction," Kent said.

"I guess I won't need to keep it." But she stuffed it into her handbag.

After a few minutes of silence the girl lifted her hand to her forehead. "I feel a little dizzy," she said timidly.

Kent looked down the aisle and caught the eye of a stewardess. He hoped Gail Weatherby wasn't going to be airsick. The stewardess hurried forward. Kent said to her:

"Miss Weatherby feels ill."

"Is there a doctor on the plane?" Gail asked.

"No doctor, but I can fix you up." The stewardess took a little box from her pocket, opened it, and shook out two pills. "I'll rush off and get a glass of water."

"I don't need water to take pills," Gail said. She took the pills and swallowed them.

The stewardess slipped a folded container up out of the pocket ahead of the girl. "If you get sick fast, use this. I'll keep an eye on you."

"I'll not get that sick," the girl said.

"Of course you won't," the stewardess agreed, then moved to the front of the plane.

Neeta Kristoff, alias Gail Weatherby, settled back with her own thoughts. There wasn't a doctor aboard. When the curare

worked, no one would suspect anything but a heart attack. She didn't feel sorry for the tall, good-looking man beside her. He was an American, smug and conceited as they all were. He was an enemy to be destroyed. But she kept her Gail Weatherby manner well intact. She'd wait awhile so the confusion wouldn't last so long. She glanced at her wrist watch. They were forty minutes out of Washington's National Airport.

Kent Barstow was thinking, too. The speed at which they were flying was great compared to most means of transportation, but it was a snail's pace compared to the twenty-four thousand miles per hour the space ship would travel. He wondered how long it would take him to learn all he had to know before he could take off. It would be rushed, he knew. Jefferys wouldn't allow a minute to be wasted.

The stewardess came by with coffee and orange juice. Both Kent and Neeta took trays of coffee. There was fruit, too, and crackers, covered with delicious meat and fish. The girl ate heartily, and so did Kent.

As Kent popped the last appetizer into his mouth Neeta Kristoff smiled inwardly as she thought, "The doomed man ate a hearty meal."

Kent glanced at the girl's hand as she reached for the stem of a strawberry. The hand was well shaped and the fingers looked strong. She wore only one ornament, a ring with an odd setting of green opaque stone. Kent felt an urge to reach out and lift the hand so that he might have a closer look at the odd stone. He knew the girl was watching him, but he didn't look up to meet her eyes.

Neeta Kristoff was watching Kent closely. He was a trained Intelligence agent. She had been assured that no one had ever used this particular device before, but the very oddity of the setting might arouse suspicion in him. She decided it was best to act at once.

Kent looked up and met her gaze. He smiled at her. "You are wearing an odd ring. Is it an heirloom?"

"Yes," she said. "It belonged to my grandmother." She lifted her hand. "Would you like to see it?" She started to pull off the ring.

"I am interested," Kent said.

She pulled carefully at the ring. Pardin had had it made a bit too snug. She must be careful because any pressure on the face of the setting would activate the needle inside the stone. What she planned to do was to press it into Kent's palm. His interest in the setting had simplified what she had to do. Once she pressed the setting against his palm he would collapse before anyone could notice she had removed the ring.

She had the ring off when the stewardess came to take away their trays. She concealed it inside her closed fingers.

"Everything to your taste?" the stewardess asked.

"Yes, very good," the girl said.

"Fine," Kent agreed.

The stewardess lifted the girl's tray and started to swing it clear of the seat. The corner of the tray hit the girl's hand. Her fingers opened quickly and the ring dropped. Neeta Kristoff knew better than to let the ring press against her palm. Better to drop it and retrieve it. The tray kept the stewardess from seeing the ring fall. She stepped on it with a well-cushioned shoe sole. Neeta gasped once, then got control

of herself. But she watched the stewardess walk away, prepared to see the girl collapse.

“Your ring,” Kent said. “I’ll get it for you.” As he reached for it she saw that it was embedded in the deep pile of the aisle rug, the band down and the setting up. She knew that the length of time the stewardess’ shoe had been pressing on the set of the ring would have allowed the small amount of curare to drain out of the tiny container. She had failed in her mission. Kent recovered the ring, looked at it, then handed it to her.

Neeta slipped the ring on her finger quickly. “I should never have taken it off,” she said sadly. “It could have been broken.”

“That rug is deep and soft,” Kent said. “You’re lucky this is a luxury liner.”

She bit her lip. “Yes,” she said. “But I hate being careless.” She was seething inside, but dared not show it. Pardin would report this to protect himself. Then she smiled at Kent. Everything might not be lost. “You are staying in San Francisco for some time?” she asked.

Kent sensed the invitation. And she was a very attractive girl. Even a space man could have worldly thoughts. Having dinner with her on Grant Street in Chinatown would be fun. He knew several excellent eating places there. He was sure such a dinner would please this shy girl.

“I have customers there,” he said.

“Oh,” she answered. “You know the city well?”

“Yes,” Kent admitted. “San Francisco is quite a city. Have you ever been in a real Chinese café?”

“No,” she said, and fixed her eyes on his face eagerly.

"If you gave me a phone number perhaps we could have dinner in a place I know in Chinatown." Kent smiled broadly.

"It would be fun." She squirmed a little and her smile was eager and excited. She got a small pad and a silver ball-point pen from her bag and wrote a phone number on it, explaining quickly, "My sister sent me the phone number just in case I need to call if my plans had to be changed."

Kent nodded. "I'll try to give you a ring, perhaps tomorrow. Yes, I'll call you even if I am so tied up I can't get away."

"I hope you aren't—tied up," she said sweetly. She was thinking about the tiny refill capsules she carried in her bag.

Kent told her something about Chinatown. They had a pleasant visit that ended when the loud-speaker announced that they were coming in for a landing. Seat-belt and no-smoking signs flashed on. This time she handled her seat belt smoothly. Kent noted that they were on time. It was just 12:45 P.M.

The big liner came down and shot along the runway, then braked to a stop. People started getting up and moving toward the exit. Kent followed the girl down the ramp, and they walked toward the concourse. Kent felt that he had been lucky having so charming a seat partner.

As they neared the open doors leading to the concourse Kent spotted a familiar face waiting back of the railing. Major Spud Murphy was grinning at Kent but he was looking at the girl with him. She looked up at Kent before they passed inside.

"Please call," she said in a low voice, then she ducked ahead and vanished in the crowd.

Kent shook his head, then smiled. It was as well not to

expose her to Spud. She wasn't experienced enough to deal with the burly major. But he would have liked to meet her sister.

Spud Murphy gripped Kent's hand and shook it. "You old reprobate!" he shouted.

"How's the old man's hardware store?" Kent asked loudly.

Spud was in civilian clothes and they didn't fit him so smartly as Kent's suit snuggled to him. When Spud had to put out cash for a suit, even Jefferys' cash, he always went to a ready-made suit store where the price was moderate. It was different with his uniforms. He always bought good material and saw that they fitted him. He let go of Kent's hand.

"The old man's out of everything but space," he answered.

They walked up the ramp and then down to the baggage room where Kent got his bag. When they were out in the parking lot seated in a staff car, Kent said:

"You assigned to me?"

"That's right. But why didn't you introduce me to that chick?"

"I have a date with her," Kent answered. "I wasn't taking chances."

"You don't have a date with any chicks. You have a date with a gadget. I'll fill in for you, not being pressed with duties." Spud grinned broadly.

"Any snoopers been spotted?" Kent asked as Spud headed the car out of the parking lot.

"No alert has been sounded," Spud answered. "But I'm hoping for some excitement." He swung across an intersection and headed toward the freeway. "You spot any suspicious characters?"

“Not a one. I guess Jefferys outwitted them. They’re probably down at Patrick AFB looking for me.” Kent straightened his legs and leaned back.

Spud looked into the rear-view mirror. “Yeah,” he said smugly. “Like the pair of goons in the car tailing us.”

5. HATCHET MEN

Kover hunched over the steering wheel, his bulldog face as blank as the wall of night on either side of the car. His jaw muscles bulged as he chewed on the four sticks of gum he had accumulated while waiting for Spud Murphy's car to leave the airport. He was a hulking man with massive shoulders. His thick, short fingers gripping the steering wheel were hairy up to the first joint.

His companion, Elkins, was a small, thin man with a hooked nose and eyes set in deep sockets. Elkins was the nervous type who fidgets constantly, but he was the brains of the pair, the boss of the operation. He was especially sour and angry at the moment because when he spotted Kent with Spud in the parking lot, he knew that Neeta had failed. That forced upon him a dangerous task which he had hoped to avoid. Disposing of Special Agent Barstow would not be easy. Elkins knew that Jefferys would have men on the job who would be looking for the sort of move he had to make. He had outwitted them before but he had had a number of very close calls. There wasn't anything he could do in the way of direct action at the moment. He would have to wait for orders from Pardin.

Both men wore hats, and that was one thing that marked them as visitors. Hats are something that only tourists wear

in California, except in San Francisco, where they do not look out of place. Kover rolled his wad of gum to his cheek and spoke in a rumbling growl.

"We got us a machine gun. Why not swing alongside and blast them?"

"The boss may want some information out of Barstow," Elkins snapped. "All we do is to see where they are going."

As he spoke, a big car roared up behind them and passed, skidding around them and cutting in fast. Kover grunted sourly. The car he was driving had speed but he couldn't use it. He did bear down, however. Elkins jerked his head around.

"Ease up," he said harshly.

Kover lifted his number-eleven shoe and the car slowed. Elkins peered into the rear-view mirror on his side of the car.

"Patrol car coming fast," he snapped.

Kover eased their speed a little more. He squinted into the rear-view mirror. The highway patrol car's red lights were blinking, indicating the driver was after a speeder. Kover wasn't worried. His driver's license and ownership slip were clear and clean. But Elkins was angry. If they were stopped, it would mean losing the car they were trailing. He had been warned that Barstow might not go directly to Vandenberg.

The highway patrol car shot past them but did not slow down. Elkins relaxed as he watched it overtake Spud's car and swing around it. The patrol was after the big car that had just passed them.

Up ahead Spud had spotted the patrol car's blinking lights and had reduced his speed to the state limit, sixty-five miles per hour.

"Cops behind us," he said out of the side of his mouth.

"After that speeder," Kent answered.

The patrol car swung around them and cut in its siren. Far ahead the speeding car vanished over a rise.

"Going to spoil somebody's fun," Spud said as he raised his speed to seventy.

"How about our tail?" Kent asked.

"Still with us. Want to pull up and have a look?" Spud glanced over at Kent.

"We'll ditch them after we get clear of the patrol car," Kent answered.

They topped the rise ahead and saw that the patrol car had stopped the speeder. It was parked ahead of the big car and an officer stood at the window with a ticket pad in his hand. As they started past, Kent looked at the driver of the big car casually, then with sudden interest. He recognized the driver. It was Gail Weatherby.

Kent eased back and down. Gail Weatherby had looked past the officer toward Spud's car. She was smiling demurely and seemed to be talking to the officer. Spud had given the big car only a casual glance.

"A dame," he said. "Bet she talks him out of giving her a ticket."

"Hard to do here in California," Kent said. He was busy wondering how Gail Weatherby happened to be speeding on this road when she was supposed to be back in San Francisco with her sister. He thought back, checking everything he had noticed about the girl. All that he could come up with was that an emergency must have arisen that caused her to leave the city in a hurry. She certainly had been driving at a furious pace.

“Know this area?” Kent asked.

“Pretty good. There’s an all-night eatery just ahead,” Spud answered.

“Pull in and I’ll alert Hansen. They may park off the road and wait for us. We’re not so far out of San Francisco. Hansen’s men can check.” Kent glanced back. The car was still behind them but it had dropped back.

They were traveling up a long grade. When they reached the top, Kent saw the eatery off the highway on their left. Spud pulled in and parked in front of the place. It was a small café but new and well kept. The boys got out of the car. They pretended not to be interested in the highway as they walked toward the entrance.

“You keep watch while I phone,” Kent said.

The café had a counter and a row of tables next to windows which looked out upon the highway. There were no other customers. A waitress was polishing glasses behind the counter. Kent hurried off to the pay phone booth at the back of the room.

The call to Captain Hansen went through promptly, and Hansen was on the line in a fraction of a minute.

“Barstow speaking,” Kent said.

“Hansen here.”

“Major Murphy and I are being tailed,” Kent explained. He knew that Hansen had been alerted and aware that Kent’s mission was one that held top priority.

“Where are you?”

“At the Hill Top Café, Canyon Road.”

“I know the place. What kind of car?”

"An old Buick, possibly '54 model. Two men. We will delay. They may park off the road and wait."

"I have a prowler car up that way. It won't take over twenty minutes to get our men there," Hansen said.

"I'll see you later." Kent hung up and stepped out of the booth.

Another customer had entered and was seated at the counter. It was the highway patrol officer. Kent walked past the officer and sat down beside Spud.

"Well?" he asked.

"They eased past slow. Big gorilla driving. Little fellow beside him. That ring a bell?" Spud had ordered coffee for Kent. He sugared it and shook his head.

"They're sure to be new," he said. He was watching the officer at the counter. "Remember that bet we made?"

"What bet?"

"That he didn't give her a ticket. I bet he did. Let's go find out." Kent grinned.

They took their cups to the counter. The officer glanced at them, then went back to his coffee. Kent sat down beside him.

"My friend and I have a bet you can settle," Kent said.

The officer set down his cup. "What was the bet?" he asked.

"My friend—" Kent nodded toward Spud—"bet me five dollars you didn't give that girl a ticket. I bet him five that you did."

The officer smiled. "Your friend owes you five bucks," he said.

"The days of chivalry are dead," Spud said sadly as he dug into his pocket. "A damsel in distress and you give her a ticket."

"She could have been in real distress if I'd let her go on driving a hundred miles an hour," the officer said mildly.

"A hundred." Kent shook his head. "She must be in a hurry to get places."

The officer grinned. "Sick sister in Salinas. Why don't they ever think up something new?"

"Could be true," Kent said. He was inclined to buy Gail Weatherby's story.

The officer left, and the boys had more coffee and orders of pie. They dallied over the pie and coffee so long that the girl back of the counter began sending suspicious glances their way. Finally two other customers entered. They came to the counter and one of them sat beside Kent. After they had ordered coffee the man next to Kent said in a low voice:

"Your ID clip makes you Barstow. Right?"

"Right," Kent answered.

"Your men didn't wait. Probably smelled a trap." The man sugared his coffee. "Want us to trail along?"

"No," Kent said. "We'll make it fine now."

Spud and Kent left the café. Spud drove at an easy pace. He wanted to ask a lot of questions. He had a few answers but not as many as he wanted.

"You got such a hush-hush mission that nobody seems to know what you're up to. I suppose Jefferys does," Spud said in a skeptical voice.

"It is top drawer," Kent admitted.

"Vandenberg is messed up with it, but we're not headed that far south," Spud said. "I hate to be messed up with something I don't understand."

“Jefferys’ orders,” Kent said. “There are only a couple of men I can talk to out here.”

“Yeah. So all I’m to know is that some goons are apt to shoot us,” Spud growled.

“They are more apt to try to put the screws on and make anyone connected with me talk. If you don’t know anything you can’t blab. That’s Jefferys speaking,” Kent added hastily.

“Well, we’re headed for a nice little hideout in the mountains. They did let me know that much. And I’m assigned to stick around and ward off duck hunters.” Spud spoke grimly.

After signing the highway patrolman’s citation, Neeta drove slowly. She passed the Hill Top Café without Spud noticing her car. She hadn’t recognized Kent in the car that had passed her while she was stopped. What she wanted to do was to overtake Kover and Elkins. She had contacted Pardin a few minutes after leaving the plane and he had told her to intercept the pair, that other agents had located the place where Kent was going. Pardin had the state highway number they would follow if they tailed Kent.

She drove slowly, knowing that Kover and Elkins must have stopped themselves after recognizing her when she was arrested. She had recognized them when she shot past their car. She had been about to slow down and make contact when the patrolman stopped her.

Five miles below the café they caught up with her and she led them off the road where she parked back of a big road sign. They pulled in beside her and got out of their car.

Elkins was angry. He stood close to her open window and glared at her. "What's the idea of getting picked up by a road cop?" he demanded.

"I talked with Pardin as soon as I left the plane. He knows where Barstow is going. You are to lay off and get in touch with C-2."

"You still on the job?" Elkins asked.

"I expect to have a date for dinner some time this week," Neeta said sweetly. "I'm heading back to San Francisco."

"He's giving you a second chance at Barstow?"

"Why not?" She smiled. "This place where he's going is crawling with Special Intelligence men and Air Force guard dogs."

Kover grunted. He once had had a brush with those dogs while trying to slip out on a B-52 flight line. Elkins rubbed his chin nervously.

"Guess we may as well take off," he said. "I smelled a trap back at that café."

"Better wait here. They'll go past after a while. They may have a patrol car following them."

"We'll wait," Elkins said grudgingly.

They waited twenty-five minutes and finally Spud and Kent drove past. After that they waited another five minutes but no other car appeared. Without a word of farewell, Kover and Elkins got into their car and drove away. Neeta sat for some time thinking. If Kent Barstow didn't call with an invitation to dinner she'd be on a spot, and there wouldn't be anything she could do about it. Pardin had made it clear that this was her last chance. She finally started the car and headed back toward San Francisco.

6. WAREHOUSE NUMBER TEN

Warehouse Number Ten was located on a bench at the foot of a wooden ridge. One small sign pointed to a branch road that led from the narrow state highway. Two miles of black-top road led in to the location. The setup probably got its name from the fact that the first building seen upon approach was a huge weathered warehouse building. The place now approached the size of a small military base. There was no flight line and the only machines capable of taking to the air were two H-19 helicopters. The whole assembly was surrounded by a high steel fence.

Kent stared past the two armed sentries at the gatehouse. He had expected nothing like this. Spud braked the car to a halt as one of the sentries stepped forward. He was surprised to see that the guard was a second lieutenant dressed in an Air Police uniform. Spud handed over his ID card. The lieutenant looked at it, then at Kent.

“One moment, sir,” he said to Spud. He turned and entered the guard cubicle where he picked up a phone and talked for several minutes. He returned to Spud’s side of the car. “I can clear you, Major, but not your friend.”

“So what do we do?” Spud asked.

“Wait.”

They waited, and presently an officer appeared striding around the corner of a building. Kent stared at the approaching officer, then grinned. He was getting a top-brass identification. The man walking toward him was Major Pender, one of Jefferys’ top men.

As Pender drew near, he smiled at Kent. Halting on Kent’s side of the car, he said, “Barstow. Good to see you, Captain.”

“May we drive in?” Spud asked.

Pender swung open the rear door of the car. “Drive on,” he said. Kent was glad to see Major Pender. He had worked with him on Mission Intruder. Pender was as tough and as shrewd as Jefferys and had had more actual field experience.

“I hear you were spotted at San Francisco International,” Pender said.

“Yes, but we shook them off,” Kent said.

Pender frowned. “This setup here is not our idea. Jefferys preferred a regular base, but somebody at the top had other ideas.”

There did not seem to be much personnel on the base. Kent saw no civilians at all. There were a few airmen and officers about. He guessed they were all in the closed buildings. Not a single building had its big doors open. Spud leaned toward him.

“I’ve been here three times and have never been inside any building but the officers’ quarters and mess.”

Pender heard him and smiled. “We have secrets,” he said.

The building they stopped before was clearly the officers’ quarters. It was a two-story barracks-type building. Spud parked the car and got out. Pender nodded toward the bar-

racks. Bachelor Officers' Quarters, mess, and offices. All under one roof.

Kent looked around. The wide expanse of open, treeless, and almost grassless area outside the high fence certainly was a security factor. At night the savage guard dogs would spot any man before he was fifty yards from the fence.

"Looks like you got the bad boys fenced out," Kent said.

Pender nodded. "From anything short of an air attack. But you won't be here very long."

"How long?" Kent asked.

Pender just shook his head and started toward an open door. Kent and Spud followed him. They entered a small office containing a desk and several chairs. There wasn't even a filing case in the room. A side door opened, and an airman entered. Pender turned to him.

"Tell Colonel Dwyer that Captain Barstow has arrived."

"Yes, sir." The sergeant did an about-face and left the room.

"Sit down, gentlemen," Pender invited. He walked around back of his desk and seated himself.

The boys sat down. They had only a minute to wait. A tall man with streaks of gray in his hair entered. He wore no jacket and his shirt was open at the throat. There were colonel's eagles on his collar. He looked quickly from Kent to Spud. Spud leaned forward eagerly. At last, he was to learn what it was all about.

"Dr. Dwyer, meet Kent Barstow," Pender said as he nodded toward Kent, who had gotten to his feet.

The colonel took a quick step toward Kent and thrust out

a hand. A boyish smile formed on his lips, making him look young.

"A pleasure, Barstow. You are a lucky man." He and Kent shook hands.

Pender nodded toward Spud. "Major Murphy, Kent's partner in this deal."

Dr. Dwyer shook hands with Spud. Pender leaned back in his chair. "Dr. Dwyer is in charge of flight preparation. He has a technical staff under him. I am in charge of security. Doc will make a space man out of you, Kent. I'll keep you alive long enough to get you in orbit."

Spud Murphy's eyes bulged and he stared at Kent, his mouth hanging open. He closed it as the colonel started speaking.

"We are working under the pressure of necessity. I have checked all of the records, tests, and past history on Captain Barstow." He smiled at Pender. "I have yielded to the pressure but I must insist upon certain tests and exercises to insure the success of the venture. I know Major Pender's chief is impatient, but we do not want to lose Barstow and the only operable space capsule we have available."

"How long will it take?" Pender asked.

"A few days here, for a shakedown on the general plan, possibly two days. A few days at the Dawson Plant to familiarize Barstow with the capsule itself and its controls. This may take more than a few days," he added dryly.

"Do I get any chance to relax?" Kent asked with a smile. He was thinking of an evening off which he would like to spend in San Francisco.

"Yes," Dr. Dwyer said seriously. "Relaxation with complete separation from the strain of concentration will be part of the processing."

"Thanks," Kent said.

The colonel went on. "There will be a briefing at Edwards AFB on re-entry as developed at Andrews AFB. And also at Edwards there will be training and practice in eating and working in weightless flight." He paused to let this sink in. No one said anything. They were all considering the staggering proportions of what was to come. The colonel went on, his voice conversational and unhurried:

"There will be several flights in an F-94C in which, for brief minutes, Barstow will be introduced to actual weightless flight." He smiled at Kent. "There are a few other things, of course."

"Can't think what they'd be," Spud said.

"They are mostly things us Aero Medics have dreamed up," the colonel said. He turned to Kent. "I suggest you shower and relax. A special detail in the mess will serve you if you are hungry."

"I'm not hungry," Kent said. He was too taut to think of food.

Pender got to his feet. "And don't go outside the fence. You couldn't make it, but don't try."

"How about my relaxation?" Kent asked. "Can't I take it in San Francisco?"

Pender frowned. "If you like company," he said, "you'll have Murphy and at least four of my men pretty close to you."

"Hope they like Chinese food," Kent said, and grinned.

Spud stepped close to him and lowered his voice. "That dark-haired doll?"

When Kent nodded, Spud whispered, "Ask her if she has a friend."

"I'll do that," Kent promised.

They left the office to get Kent's bag and to get settled down.

7. CRAMPED QUARTERS

Kent had no desire to rest and relax. He was eager to see what was concealed inside the closed buildings. Dr. Dwyer had hinted that he would be given the real lowdown here. Spud lounged on one of the two beds in their room.

“Space man,” he muttered. He was still finding it hard to believe his pal was going to make a trip into outer space. He looked at Kent and shook his head. “When I was a kid I used to dream of going with Buck Rogers. I grew up and decided that stuff was for the birds.”

Kent grinned at him. “Buck was smarter than a lot of folks thought.”

“I read some place that these space ships are set up for two men,” he said hopefully.

“On test flights they plan to send along a doctor, somebody like Colonel Dwyer. This is a business trip, and I have a hunch the doc’s space will be used for special equipment,” Kent said thoughtfully.

“That Jefferys,” Spud said, and grinned. “I wonder if he’d go himself if no one volunteered?”

“He’d go,” Kent answered. “Jefferys is as tough as they come and he hasn’t a nerve in his body.”

"Yeah," Spud agreed. He swung his feet off the bed to the floor. "I'm ready for action," he said.

"Suppose we get hold of Dwyer and see if we can't get started this afternoon." Kent reached for his cap. He had been thinking about going to see Dwyer for the past half-hour.

"Good idea." Spud got to his feet and grabbed his cap.

They left the barracks and walked to Pender's office. Pender wasn't in but there was a very efficient-looking three-stripe airman at his desk. He looked at Spud and Kent, his eyes staying on Kent.

"Anything I can do for you gentlemen?" He sounded more like an efficient office executive than an airman. What Hap Kelly was spelled efficiency; he was an electronics expert, thoroughly acquainted with the delicate instruments used in ground control of missiles—and space capsules.

"I'd like a word with Colonel Dwyer," Kent said.

Hap Kelly smiled. He had been wondering how long the tall, serious-faced captain with the close-cropped hair would be able to stay away. According to his calculations Kent was within five minutes of the time Hap had set for his arrival.

"I'll tell him you're here," he said, and got to his feet.

"Acts like a major general," Spud said as he watched Hap Kelly's broad shoulders disappear through a doorway.

"Probably as efficient," Kent said. "The place is probably crawling with airmen first class, all technicians, all experts."

Hap Kelly poked his head into the room. "The colonel will see you." He backed away, and Spud and Kent entered Colonel Dwyer's office. They found it more of a lab than an office. Large tables were loaded with books and parts of machines. It looked like a haphazard mess, but Kent knew

that it wasn't. The little white tags on each piece, even the tiny ones, indicated everything was immediately identifiable.

"You wanted to see me?" Colonel Dwyer had changed to rather baggy fatigue clothes which were stained but clean.

Kent smiled. "I guess I'm ready to start absorbing a few things," he said.

The colonel smiled and nodded. "No time like now," he said briskly. He glanced at Kent. "From now on, get some comfortable things to wear. No rank here, just a team at work."

As they left the colonel's office and entered the one being used temporarily by Pender, the major entered. He had some papers in his hand. He dropped the papers on his desk and turned to Spud.

"Several characters have been parked in a trailer close to the junction where our road connects with the highway. Better shake them down. Inquisitive local boy asking questions."

Spud scowled. He suspected a plot to keep him from going with Kent. "How soon do you want this info?" he asked.

"At once."

"That's what I figured," Spud said sourly. He turned and headed toward his car. Pender stopped him.

"Get into some beat-up clothes. See Miller in Supply." Pender pointed toward a small building.

Spud headed toward the building. Usually he played stand-in for Ken, but this time he knew there would be little chance that he would have to replace Captain Barstow.

Kent walked with Dwyer to a large building. An armed airman opened a side door for them and they entered. The room had a high ceiling and measured about fifty by fifty

feet. There were a number of machines in the room which Kent recognized. They were all grouped around a machine he had never seen before. It was roughly conical in shape, and about seven feet across at the base and ten feet high. There was a boom fitted with rockets atop the machine. Dwyer halted before it.

"This is a duplicate of your space capsule, minus instruments for guidance," he said.

Kent stared at the odd-looking machine. It was far from the needle-nosed, slim-bellied aircraft he had flown. It looked clumsy and would certainly build up a lot of air resistance at high speed. Dwyer sensed his thoughts.

"In airless outer space there is no need for streamlining. The capsule can be any shape. We have selected a design to meet our needs."

Kent nodded gravely. "I keep forgetting those things," he said.

"This capsule is designed to operate at altitudes up to six hundred miles for a period of forty-eight hours." Dwyer smiled. "We have a feeling our visitor will be down to a hundred and fifty miles very soon. At that altitude this capsule will be extremely maneuverable."

"That's encouraging," Kent said.

Dwyer nodded. He was intensely serious now, eager to give Kent the general picture. He moved closer to the space craft. Kent looked in through a plastic window. There was a seat inside that was different from the ejection seats he had known and used. It had a headrest, and on the right arm there was a lever which might be for steering. On the left there was a

black box with push buttons on its top. The struts and braces inside the craft seemed to be almost flimsy.

“Not built to take much of a beating,” Kent observed.

“There will be no pressures on it except during launching and re-entry. We have satellite balloons in orbit with plastic skin one four-thousandth of an inch in thickness.”

Kent nodded, recalling Sir Echo, which was the first such satellite.

“Escape from this craft has been perfected. You will note when you inspect the interior that you have a compartment separate from the work area. This compartment can be separated from the aft compartment by use of rockets which you can fire. In this separated part you can maneuver and return to earth safely. You can even leave the capsule and return to it.” Dwyer slid back a panel so that Kent could look at the control machinery. It was complex and compact. He would probably not have time to learn all about those instruments, but his keen engineer’s mind was roused to intense interest.

“Escape in launching could be sticky. Quite a lot of flame and heat from the booster,” he said.

“The propulsion system for the last stage of the rocket system will be fired from the blockhouse, sending you upward from four thousand feet to as high as twenty-five thousand feet, well away from an explosion of the rocket,” Dwyer explained.

“That’s comforting,” Kent said.

“You are aware,” Dwyer went on, “that in take-off the terrific speed is a problem. Your weight will be increased to

twelve times normal as you attain escape speed, which will be eighteen thousand miles per hour."

"A man can take that?" Kent asked doubtfully.

"Yes. We have made extensive tests. We find that it is tolerable when you are in a position perpendicular to the direction you are traveling. That way the forces pass from back to chest and have little effect upon the blood flow." Dwyer closed the panel and stepped back.

"How long will this stress last?" Kent asked.

"Less than five minutes. We figure just under that time to place you in outer space." He turned away from the capsule.

Kent took a last look at the craft he was to fly. Probably the actual capsule he would man would be a little different, but not much. He turned and followed Dwyer. The doctor went on with his briefing.

"Heat, as you know, has posed a problem. It is not bad on launching because the period is very brief. On re-entry we have worked out controls which will slow your speed and reduce friction. Solar heat can be reduced by slowly rotating the capsule so that the cold of the shady side balances the heat of the sun side."

"Might make observation spotty," Kent suggested.

"You can stabilize for periods long enough to make observations," Dwyer assured him.

"You have the radiation problem solved?" Kent asked.

"At over a hundred thousand feet Lieutenant Colonel Simons felt no radiation effects when he made his balloon flight of thirty-two hours." Dwyer paused as though checking the data stored away in his head. Finally he said, "We have

it very well mapped out and charted. You will not be in an area where the various rays, such as ultra-violet, beta particles, and such will interfere.”

They left the building and walked toward the barracks. Kent was thinking that there was so much to know and so little time to absorb it all. As they neared the building, Spud drove up and parked. He got out of his car and walked toward them. He was dressed in a faded blue denim shirt and an equally faded pair of overalls. All he lacked was a battered straw hat to make him look like a farmer just in from the fields.

Pender came out of his office and joined them as Spud stopped beside them.

“You made a fast check,” Pender said. “What did you learn?”

“Just a couple of guys looking for a spineless cactus. Agriculture Department, I guess,” Spud answered.

Pender’s eyes narrowed. “United States Department of Agriculture?” he asked sharply.

“Guess so,” Spud answered. “A farmer boy would hardly poke in too much.”

Pender turned back to his office. Kent knew what he was going to do. In a very few minutes he would know whether the United States Department of Agriculture had any men in this area looking for a spineless cactus.

“I think you can finish here by tomorrow night,” Dwyer said. “Then if you feel like a trip to San Francisco you will be free, but the next day you’ll be off to Holloman AFB in New Mexico for spaceless tests in an F-94C.”

Kent smiled. He wasn't thinking about the weightless briefing, he was thinking about dinner at a Chinese café on Grant Street. But he nodded and said, "Action, that's what I came for."

He and Spud left the colonel and went to their room. They would shower and get ready for dinner. As they entered their room Spud said:

"Dibs on the first shower. They may be short of hot water."

"Go ahead," Kent said.

Spud stripped and got into the shower. Kent sat down at the room desk and reached for the phone. He had a hunch Pender had all phones monitored, but he didn't care. Pender already knew he was planning on a date. He got out his notebook and checked Gail Weatherby's number.

He was lucky to get her at once. This was quite natural because Neeta Kristoff had been sticking close to her phone all afternoon, though Kent had no way of knowing that she hadn't left her room all afternoon.

Her voice came over the wire, shy and hesitant. "Hello. I'm glad you called."

"Busy tomorrow night?" Kent asked.

"No."

"How about dinner on Grant Street?"

"I'd like it. My sister is so busy. I haven't been anywhere."

"See you at seven." Kent smiled as he hung up the receiver.

At the other end of the line Neeta made a call. She talked to Elkins, briefing him on her date, and telling him she'd be at the house they had rented. He was to have a sister on hand.

8. FAREWELL PARTY

Spud wasn't unhappy because Kent had not asked Gail Weatherby to find him a girl. He figured that an evening with Gail and Kent would not be very exciting, and he had a few addresses and phone numbers in San Francisco. They rode into the city together with Pender's boys, four of them, trailing along behind.

They parted on Market Street where Kent got a cab to take him to the address Gail had given him. Spud grinned at his pal as Kent got out of the car.

"You won't mind if I duck off on my own?" he asked, and added quickly, "Those four guys Pender has sent along might cramp my style."

"Run along," Kent said with a grin.

After the cab had gone four blocks, the driver turned his head and said, "I got a feelin' we're being tailed. Want I should shake them?"

Kent considered the idea but shook his head and said, "No. Just forget those boys."

"I can ease into an alley I know," the driver said.

"Let them have their fun." Kent leaned back. It would be

nice to be able to have dinner with Gail Weatherby without having four armed guards sitting around watching.

At a small house far out on Kearney Street Elkins and Kover squatted behind a big hydrangea bush and watched the street. Inside the house Neeta Kristoff had finished getting ready to go out to dinner. She used little make-up and wore a simple cotton dress. The last thing she did before sitting down to wait for Kent was to slip a fresh capsule into her ring. She never kept it charged except when needed. In fact, she was afraid of the deadly ring. An accident could happen, with her the victim.

Outside, back of the hydrangea bush, Elkins was making sure the dull-witted Kover knew what the score was.

"She has orders to get him while he's in that house. I wouldn't put it above her to try for a nice evening and then take him when they come home."

Kover grunted. He didn't like doing things the carefully planned way. He liked direct action. Elkins went on explaining:

"If she comes out with him, you take him with the knife. Then we duck through the back way to our car before the cabdriver, if he's using a cab, knows what's happened."

"What about Neeta?" Kover asked.

"I have an idea she'll be right on our heels." Elkins craned his neck to look around the bush. For a job like this, Kover was the right man, deadly accurate with a thin-bladed knife.

They waited ten minutes before they heard a car coming. Then a cab drew up at the curb. They watched Kent get out. The cab did not leave. Kent came up the walk, brushed past,

his sleeve touching the bush. He stepped on the porch and pushed the bell button. The door opened and they saw Neeta. A moment later Kent was inside.

Both men listened intently to the voices inside the house but couldn't hear what was being said. It appeared that Neeta was introducing the phony sister. Kover slipped his knife out from inside his belt. He slid a thumb along the six-inch blade even though he knew the knife was razor-sharp.

The talking stopped inside the house. A few minutes later the door opened and the path was flooded with white light. Kover crouched and waited for the door to close and shut out the flood of light. Kent and Neeta were clearly outlined before the door closed and they started down the steps.

Kover straightened and lifted one arm. He wanted Kent against the street light on the corner. His huge arm muscles knotted and he peered around the bush, his head thrust forward. Then he started to move, silently but swiftly, his sponge-rubber soles getting a good grip on the cement of the walk.

Suddenly Elkins' hand gripped his arm and jerked him around. Kover didn't make a sound but the harsh intake of his breath told Elkins he was furious. He tried to shake the little man off, but as he did so he knew he had missed his chance. Kent and Neeta were halfway to the cab. He stood glaring at them as they got in and drove away. Then he saw the other car with four men in it move out and follow the cab.

"He's covered," Kover said in disgust.

"They'd have got us both before we could have taken three steps," Elkins said. "I spotted them just in time."

"What do we do now?" Kover asked.

"He told her on the plane he was taking her to Yen Foo Café on Grant Street in Chinatown. We'll eat there, too, and keep an eye on them."

"We get him afterward?"

"Those four men won't leave him. When he takes her home and doesn't come out or drops on the porch they close in," Elkins said sourly. "We'll stick to them, but I don't think we'll be able to do anything."

"They'll nab Neeta." Kover scowled.

"Let them have her. I'll report that she didn't do what she was told." Elkins started toward the back of the house.

Neeta had decided that she would be demure little Gail Weatherby for the evening. It would be fun to lead this dumb special agent on, not that he wasn't handsome and nice company. He was just too nice for her. She kept to her side of the seat, her hands folded in her lap, not looking at Kent.

Kent knew that he wasn't in Spud's class with the girls. They just didn't interest him in the way they interested Spud. He had liked Gail just as he liked Carrie, and wanted to do something for her just as he had been nice to Carrie in leaving his car for her to use.

Grant Street is narrow and it is one way leading to the Yen Foo Café. But it is Chinese. Chinatown in San Francisco is the biggest single colony of Chinese-Americans anywhere. In fact, the biggest group of Chinese outside China. The windows were gayly lighted and filled with imported items calculated to catch the eyes of the tourists. Most of the people on the street were Orientals.

The cab stopped at the curb before the café entrance. The driver opened the door and Neeta got out. Kent paid the driver and tipped him. They stood on the sidewalk for a moment with people pushing past them. Neeta looked up into Kent's face.

"Scary, isn't it?" she said in an awed voice.

Kent laughed. "They're all good Americans," he said, and tucked her arm over his.

Kent led her up stairs of marble and they entered a hallway. A small, dapper Chinese man stepped forward.

"Table for two?" he asked.

Kent nodded, and they followed the head waiter to a table next to a window. They sat across from each other. Menus were placed before them. Neeta looked over at Kent.

"You order, please," she said.

Kent opened the large ornate menu and studied it. Finally he looked up with a smile.

"You trust me?"

"Yes," she said demurely. Inwardly she hoped he knew enough about Chinese foods to pick a really good dinner.

The waiter brought a pot of tea and two small cups. He poured for them, and asked:

"You care for a drink?"

"Oh, no," Neeta said quickly.

The waiter backed up several steps and waited.

Kent looked at the waiter, and he moved close to the table, smiling. "Soup, Peking duck, shrimp Yen Foo with lobster sauce." He folded the menu.

"You like Cantonese bird's-nest soup?" the waiter asked hopefully.

"No, just the Yen Foo special with chicken," Kent answered with a smile. "But don't forget the fried rice."

The waiter bowed and moved away. Neeta looked about, then said timidly, "There isn't any sugar."

"The Chinese think sugar ruins tea," Kent said. He was watching Pender's men split up, two at a table. They had managed to get located very well without seeming to demand special places.

Kent returned his attention to Neeta when the soup was served. He was a little worried for fear she would not like the thick, rich soup. But she dipped in and ate with relish.

They had started on the Peking duck when Spud showed up with an attractive blonde. He had been unable to resist watching Kent have a date with an armed guard watching. Also, Kent had picked the best café on the street. No sign of recognition passed between Kent and Spud, but Neeta remembered that Spud was the man who had met Kent at the air terminal. This didn't bother her at all.

Spud and his girl sat two tables away from Neeta and Kent. They laughed and joked as they ordered.

Neeta knew that she was attacking her dinner with too much relish, but the food was excellent, and she was hungry. Kent watched her with approval. He was pleased that she was enjoying herself. This was the last time he would be out with a girl until his mission was over. He decided he'd forget space problems and have a good time.

He hardly noticed Elkins and Kover when they came in, but Pender's men noticed them, especially Kover. It was the first flicker of interest they had shown in any of the patrons, and it was hardly more than a flicker. Kover was

a type, clearly a hard guy, but he looked as though he belonged with a gangster group rather than a foreign agent.

Neeta finished her duck and the shrimp with the lobster sauce. She was tempted to mop up the remaining lobster sauce in her dish, but knew if she scooped it up that would mark her as someone who had eaten such a dish many times. Kent solved the problem for her. He started spooning up the sauce.

"Shame to send any of this back to the kitchen," he explained.

Neeta picked up her spoon and started on the sauce. After they had finished they sat drinking tea. Neeta sized Kent up without more than a few shy looks at him. She had thought of leading him on so that he'd offer her a good-night kiss. That would be ideal. Her hand around his neck with the setting of the ring turned inside. A gentle pressure, and her job would be done. Now she was sure the best she could manage would be an impulsive grasping of his hand when she thanked him for a pleasant evening. But that would be enough.

They drank two more cups of tea. "Have you sold a lot of hardware?" she asked suddenly.

"Not too bad," Kent said. "But that reminds me that I have an early appointment."

"Then we will go," she said sweetly. He wasn't even going to ask her to go dancing. .

Kent hesitated. He knew he probably should show her the town, but he suddenly wanted to get back to the barracks and get to bed so that he could be up early. "It's early," he ventured.

Neeta had gotten to her feet. She gathered up her small

handbag. "No," she said. "I'm a small-town girl and like to go to bed early."

Kent held her wrap for her, then checked the money he had left on the tray to make sure he had tipped liberally. They started for the exit. Kent grinned as he noticed one of Pender's men frantically finishing his sweet-sour pork. He caught Spud's eye. Spud was scowling. He had expected Kent to make an evening of it. This would upset all of his plans.

The hall outside the dining room was crowded with people waiting for tables. Kent worked his way toward the stairway with Neeta ahead of him. Suddenly he felt a hand grip his arm. He was pulled around, and found himself looking into the face of Major Pender. It was clear that Pender was a worried man.

"What's up?" Kent asked.

"Did you come here with a small dark-haired girl?" Pender asked.

"Sure," Kent admitted. He half-turned to introduce Gail Weatherby to Pender. He blinked quickly. Gail had vanished. "She must have gone to the powder room."

"She's gone," Pender said grimly, "but not to the powder room."

At that moment Pender's four men came pushing through the crowd. They halted when they saw their chief and Kent. All looked surprised.

"Let's get out of here," Pender said.

"What brought you here, Chief?" one of the men asked.

"A call from Jefferys," Pender said briefly. Then he stopped and looked from Kent to his men. "Was there a big plug-ugly and a little runt in there eating?"

“Yes. They’re probably in there yet,” one of the men said.

“We’ll take them,” Pender said. “Get set at the bottom of the stairs.”

Kent knew he had been tricked and almost baited into a trap. He thought ruefully, I’m not much of a hand at sizing up women.

Pender’s men had moved off fast. Pender turned to Kent.

“Is Spud in there?”

“With a blonde,” Kent said.

“Stay with him. You’re not to get mixed up in any fight.”

Pender turned and hurried after his men.

Kent started to return to the dining room when he saw the big man and the little one step out of the dining room. They parted, the little man heading toward the stairs, the big man turning to a side door. Kent wondered if the pair had been at the edge of the crowd and heard Pender order them taken into custody. It was entirely possible.

He moved fast, following the big man through the doorway. There was a short landing and a narrow flight of stairs. Back of him he heard Spud’s voice:

“Hey, Kent, just a minute.”

He didn’t stop but raced down the stairs. Hitting the bottom, he found himself in a storeroom filled with crates and boxes. There was a narrow lane between the boxes. At the end of the lane he saw the big man trying to open a door. Kent wasn’t armed and he had a hunch the big man was. He stopped and started to back up, realizing he had no business risking his life to catch one enemy agent. He had taken only one step when the big man whirled. He stared at Kent for a brief moment, then bared his teeth in a snarl and lunged forward.

A knife flashed and drew back for a throw. Kent backed into the steep stairs and sat down. Close above him he heard the blast of a gun, the familiar wham of a service revolver. The big man's raised arm dropped and the knife clattered to the floor. An instant later Spud leaped over him and stood covering the hulking man.

"What do you mean by trying to get killed?" Spud growled over his shoulder.

"It was a fool thing to do," Kent agreed as he scrambled to his feet. "How come you are on the job so fast?"

"All I came out to do was ask you to ride home with Pender's boys," Spud said. "Then I saw you chase this goon in here and decided I'd better get on the job."

"My lucky night," Kent said. "Keep him here while I get some of Penders boys to take over."

As Kent started up the stairs, he saw faces peering down at him. The shot had caused turmoil in the lobby above. Then the faces were thrust aside and Pender was on the landing with two of his men back of him.

"You all right, Barstow?" he shouted.

"I'm all right," Kent called back, and started to climb the stairs. "Better send your men down to help Spud. He has a man cornered down here."

A half-hour later Kent, Spud, and Pender sat in a café drinking coffee. Spud was so upset he sent the blonde home alone in a cab. Jefferys had made it clear to him that Kent was his special responsibility and he was an efficient officer. Pender didn't waste his breath blaming anyone, but he scowled as he sipped his coffee.

"Jefferys' boys picked up a man who talked a little. He

was in a bad corner and wanted to trade. Caused quite a stir. An agricultural attaché and two of his staff have disappeared in Washington. The girl was an agent. She's a curare specialist, I gather." He looked grimly at Kent. "You're lucky to be alive."

Kent thought back to the meeting with Gail Weatherby. "The odd ring," he said. "She flubbed it by accident on the plane."

"Could be," Pender said. "We don't know what sort of instrument she used."

"How about the men?" Kent asked.

"The little one is a slippery fellow. He got away. My guess is that the big one with the smashed hand will turn out to be just a hatchet man." He frowned unhappily. "We didn't even dent their organization. Jefferys will be furious."

"I'm the one who acted stupid," Kent said. "I thought I was a space man and forgot that I'm a special agent. Let's get back to the base."

9. WEIGHTLESS FLIGHT

Pender was well satisfied that Kent wanted only to absorb data on space flight. He didn't worry about Kent's safety so long as he was within the enclosure of the base. The spot selected for assembling data was so security tight that no one could get in who wasn't completely trusted.

Kent discovered that less than a half-dozen men, not including Spud and himself, knew that Kent was being sent up very soon. Most of the hundred men on the base considered him another volunteer who was being given the works.

The time at Warehouse Ten passed quickly. Kent stored away everything Dwyer could give him, working day and night for an additional day. Then it was time to go to the Holloman AFB flight line. The choice had been between Edwards and Holloman. Dwyer had selected the latter, even though some of the testing at Edwards was more advanced.

Spud was now a dedicated watchdog. He resented Pender's men, but Pender, driven by a relentless Jefferys, was having one of his bad times. He was sure there was a plot to balk the flight, but couldn't pin down any actual evidence. So far as he had been able to learn the earth had opened and swallowed Pardin, Neeta Kristoff, and Elkins. No information

had been pried out of Kover, who was in a military hospital under guard.

Kent left for Holloman on a Wednesday morning. He rode with Spud but their car had to follow Pender's and was trailed by another car. Kent felt a little irked. Always before he and Spud had been on their own, matching wits with unknown operators.

"I'm surprised we don't go in an armored car," he said to Spud.

"Don't suggest it," Spud answered cheerfully. "It's something Jefferys hasn't thought of yet."

They arrived at Holloman at noon and had lunch after depositing their bags at BOQ. Pender showed up just before they finished eating. He sat down at their table and scowled bleakly. Spud and Kent waited to learn why he was in a vile mood.

"Just talked to Jefferys," he said morosely. "He's really burned up."

"Why?" Kent asked.

Spud grinned. "I'll bet he's uncovered another spy footprint out here on the desert."

"Somebody got to Kover and gave him the curare treatment," Pender said. "Just when Jefferys was sure the big goon was about to spill everything."

"A girl?" Kent asked.

Pender nodded. "A nurse, and she's vanished."

"Not my friend Gail Weatherby?" Kent asked.

"Could be, though this one was a blonde. Jefferys says it was well organized. Transfer nurse found tied up in a room.

Credentials stolen.” Pender shook his head. “Somebody goofed by not checking out fingerprints.”

Kent smiled. Little Gail was a top actress. He had an idea she hadn’t too much trouble passing herself off for a nurse. He almost wished he would meet her again.

Pender got to his feet. “Just wanted to warn you, Barstow. This thing is getting on everybody’s nerves.” He stared at Kent. “Hope it isn’t upsetting you too much.”

Kent smiled. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve been a target before.”

Pender went out, and Kent looked at Spud. Spud was frowning. “Wish they’d yank some of Pender’s bird dogs off the job. That way something might break.”

Kent got to his feet. “No chance of that. Well, I’m due on the flight line in ten minutes.”

“Run you right out,” Spud said.

When they reached the flight line they found the F-94C ready and waiting. Kent walked toward the steel cockpit ladder. As he approached he recognized Colonel Dwyer who was talking to a bulkily clad officer. They nodded to Kent when he stopped. Laced tightly into an anti-G suit, the officer looked solid and dependable. Dr. Dwyer was dressed in casual, almost sloppy clothes.

“Am I late?” Kent asked.

“No,” Dwyer answered with a smile. “I was going over some diagrams with Captain Dean.” He nodded at a granite-faced man with serious gray eyes.

“I’m interested in your diagrams,” Kent said.

“Then listen in,” Dwyer said. “There is no pressing rush.”

Kent was glad Jefferys couldn't hear those words. He stepped closer.

"Here's what the diagrams show," Dwyer spoke in a conversational voice. "One with just the G-spirals, then straight and level flight. But here, from twenty-five thousand feet, the spirals are down to fifteen feet, then full thrust and ascending parabola. There should be at least six G's from acceleration. Then forty seconds' subgravity in the upward arc."

Captain Dean nodded. For weeks he had been flying just such missions, always from varying instructions.

"Then the reverse pattern," Dwyer said. "Afterburner on, full thrust to thirty-three thousand, same subgravity. Then here you have four hundred knots at parabola end. This should be followed by thirty-second spirals." He stopped talking and smiled at Kent. "Mean anything to you, Barstow?"

Kent nodded. "I'll get suited up," he said, and started off. A jeep swung in close to pick him up. Spud sat at the flight-line entrance watching.

When Kent returned suited up in the bulky outfit he was to wear, the crew chief was giving the aircraft its final check. He came down signaling his O.K. Garbed in tightly laced G-suits and round polished helmets with bulbous masks, Kent and Dean climbed aboard. Dwyer followed them. Beneath the raised canopy of the trim Lockheed they adjusted themselves to narrow seats.

Dwyer made his own check, muttering softly to himself. "Clock and accelerometer in place." He smiled at Kent. "You know how to react from our briefing. You know when to re-

move your mask. Be sure it goes to one side. Your face must be quite clear from the camera. I want you to be able to study your reactions.”

Dwyer bent to examine the 1-mm. camera. The long-barreled lens pointed like a gun at Kent's head. He nodded approvingly and slid along the ladder to peer into the cockpit. He seemed satisfied.

Ken settled back and waited. He was very familiar with most of the sensations he would encounter, such as multi-gravity, which loaded the body with weight and drained the brain of blood, causing blackout and unconsciousness.

It was the fantastic opposite Kent was interested in, the phenomenon of subgravity or weightlessness, where his body would lose its one-G load and float without ordinary sensations.

This was something he would encounter and he would need what preparation he could get in order to meet any reactions he as an individual might have. Not all men who had been tested reported the same sensations. In some cases the reactions were of a nature that would make space flight dangerous or at least impair the ability of the astronaut.

Captain Dean was cleared and the Lockheed jet screamed down the runway and was off. Through the intercom Kent heard the captain's voice.

“Dean to Barstow.”

“Reading you, Barstow.”

This was to test the intercom, but Dean went on. “Want to ditch the G-spirals?” Kent heard a chuckle. “Doc wants to add you to his guinea-pig list, but you've been through a lot more G's than I can deliver.”

"Ditch them," Kent said.

"Up we go." Dean's voice was cheerful.

With afterburner kicked on, the jet shot upward. The altimeter rolled past twenty thousand, up and up with the engine on full thrust. At thirty-three thousand feet, hitting the curve of the parabola at four hundred knots, Dean went into thirty-second spirals and Kent felt the weight of his body vanish, drained away. He slid aside his mask and the 16-mm. camera recorded his facial reactions.

Kent felt alert and clear-minded as he went into each thirty seconds of weightlessness. There was no seat pressure or any other pressure. He moved his hands, and when he pressed against the chair arm, he at once felt the pressure of the belt. Without the belt he would have floated. His right hand punched buttons on the black box, following a pattern arranged with Dwyer.

The tests were quickly finished and the jet came knifing in for a landing. Dwyer and Spud were in the pickup station wagon that rolled out to meet them as they climbed down the metal ladder.

Dwyer peered anxiously at Kent as he removed his helmet. Kent grinned at him.

"Not a thing I haven't experienced a hundred times," Kent said cheerfully.

"I guess we can pass up the transport-airplane chamber test," the colonel said. "But we'll have to wait and see how the button-control pattern worked out."

"Some stunt flying," Spud said, and grinned at Captain Dean.

They climbed into the station wagon and rode to Operations where Kent got out of the pressure suit. Dwyer came in while he was dressing. He nodded toward the suit Kent had just got out of.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"The best outfit I've ever worn. New?"

"Developed for space flight. It's a ventilation garment. Air is introduced around the body and exhausted through ports. Cooling is accomplished by evaporation of the body perspiration."

"It works," Kent said.

"In it you can fly indefinitely at two hundred and forty degrees," Dwyer said. "You can take five hundred degrees for short periods." He patted the suit fondly. "Five hundred is as much as our chamber can generate." He smiled. "If you weren't in such a hurry we'd check much higher."

Spud came in from the coffee bar and stood listening. "Good spot to roast the Thanksgiving turkey," he said.

"We are working out a device where you could roast the turkey on one side and freeze it on the other," Dwyer said.

"That might be the condition in straightaway space flight?" Kent asked.

"It probably would be," Dwyer admitted.

Kent was ready to leave. He held out his hand to the colonel. "Will I be seeing you again?"

"You will," Dwyer answered. "Until you are in orbit you are my big project."

"That is reassuring," Kent said. "I'm going to need all the help I can get."

They walked out of Operations and got into Spud's car. Before Spud started his engine, he looked over the cars in the parking lot. There was a green sedan parked nearby with two men in it. One of them grinned and lifted a hand. Spud returned the salute without enthusiasm.

10. SKELETON

Pardin had gone underground one jump ahead of Jefferys' men, but he wasn't out of action. He had an active crew, though he had lost the usefulness of Elkins and had been forced to strike fast to keep Kover from talking. Silencing Kover was a necessity. The big man had known many of the hideouts and more operatives than Pardin could afford to hide or send home.

But at the moment Pardin was frustrated. He had never tackled an assignment where the security was so tight. He had always laughed at the American way of doing things. He could get the location of every major Air Force base by collecting road maps. Or by bribing a newspaper reporter to ask the Office of Information for press kits.

The biggest thorn had been Jefferys and his men. Pardin wasn't fool enough to discount what they could do. He was the fourth top expert to be sent to America. Jefferys had nabbed the other three, and Captain Kent Barstow had been the key man in every case. All the more reason why he wanted Barstow liquidated.

He sat in a back room of a house owned by a man named Jacob Delroy. Delroy raised and trained a special breed of German shepherd dog. His specialty was guard dogs, though

he did sell dogs for pets, and if a dog seemed too friendly he would let Guide Dogs for the Blind have the animal.

No one questioned the motives of Jacob Delroy. No one knew where he came from. He had been an accepted member of the community for eight years. Once in a while someone would wonder how he could make any money on a small turnover while he used three trainers. Pardin knew. It was he who paid the three men, and they did many other things beside train guard dogs. They had access to tight security places where the dogs were to be used. Delroy also saw to it that his men trained the dogs to know and obey them.

Pardin had Neeta Kristoff and Elkins in the room with him. He had demonstrated that Neeta could still be useful by having her take care of Kover. He drummed his hands on the table and frowned.

"There has to be a skeleton in the past of at least one man working close to that astronaut program," he said.

Neeta did not have the answer, but Elkins thought he had an idea. "Get to the commercial suppliers. The company engineers and technicians have a big part in any launching."

Pardin glanced toward the open door. Delroy stood peering in. He was a tall, sandy-haired man with very nearsighted eyes that forced him to wear heavy-lensed glasses.

"Come in," Pardin growled.

Delroy slouched into the room. He peered at Pardin and moved close to the table.

"Two extra dogs needed at Vandenberg," he said.

Pardin brightened. "Use Porter and Jones."

"We got two they've worked a lot," Delroy said.

Pardin nodded. He stared thoughtfully at an inkwell on his desk. This wasn't much of a break, but at least it was something. Delroy turned and shuffled out. He wasn't the curious sort, which made him an ideal man to work with.

"Send Jones in," Pardin said to Elkins. Elkins got to his feet and left. Pardin leaned back, clasped his hands behind his head, and closed his eyes. Neeta fidgeted. She felt she was perfectly safe and she didn't like being cooped up back of a dog kennel. She had dropped in on Pardin with the idea of asking Pardin if she couldn't take one of the cars and drive to Lompoc where she could see a show.

Pardin opened his eyes and looked at her. It was apparent that he wasn't seeing her at all. There was a vacant look in those eyes.

"Guess I'll run into Lompoc and see a show tonight," Neeta said.

"Jones may spot something," Pardin said.

Neeta got to her feet. "It's O.K. then for me to go?"

"Where?" Pardin blinked his eyes.

"Lompoc."

"No."

"Nobody will be looking for a blonde." Neeta tossed her head angrily.

"Every one of Jefferys' men is looking for a blonde," Pardin said.

Neeta knew he was right. "I'll do a dye job and be a redhead."

"Do it. May have a job for you." Pardin lifted the inkwell and looked at it. An inkwell with no ink in it, no pens either. He set the inkwell down and watched Neeta walk out.

A minute later Jones came in. He was a man of twenty-four, an ordinary fellow whom no one would give a second look. His name wasn't Jones and he wasn't an ordinary fellow. He had taken a four-year course in espionage and had served two years in the field.

"You wanted to see me?" Jones asked.

Pradin nodded toward a chair. "Sit down." He glanced at the door. "Where's Elkins?"

"Hanging around the dog runs. I think he'd like to have one of those dogs."

Pardin snorted. "That's all he needs, a dog."

Jones grinned. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, shook one out, and stuck it into his mouth. Pardin frowned. He always frowned when one of his men took up a decadent habit.

"Vandenberg wants two dogs. You will hand them over and suggest that you work a few days with the guards," Pardin said.

"Those boys are dog men. They won't let me have more than an afternoon and an evening."

"Extra dogs mean tighter security," Pardin said. "Right now that could only be the space deal. See what you can. Find out if there's a way to get to Barstow or their flight capsule."

Jones shrugged his shoulders. "It's a long shot," he said as he got to his feet.

"These dogs well trained?"

"Both answer a whistle a man can't hear," Jones said with a grin. "And do a few other tricks."

"Find out what you can," Pardin said in dismissal.
Jones left the room and Pardin went back to thinking.

In Room 304 Jefferys was in a bearish mood. He had ordered Major Pender to come in by jet. Pender sat across the desk from him.

"Nothing at all has happened since the attempt on Barstow in San Francisco," Jefferys growled.

Pender smiled thinly. "We have clamped down tight," he said, a bit of an edge in his voice.

"And our friends haven't quit. They have plans made. They'll strike."

"How?" Pender asked wearily.

Jefferys brought a fist down on the desk. "How? That's what we should know. I need Barstow poking around. He's the best man we ever had at making things happen."

"You want to risk it?" Pender asked.

A thin smile formed on Jefferys' lips. "I think I'll call Barstow."

"He has a lot on his mind," Pender warned.

"If I know Barstow he's done some thinking about this." Jefferys reached for his phone.

Ten minutes later Kent was on the line. Jefferys wasted no time in getting to the point. "Have any ideas on what may be on foot to stop you from launching?"

"No," Kent answered promptly.

"We're doing too much defensive thinking out there. We need offensive thinking," Jefferys snapped.

He couldn't see Kent's grin as he said, "Want me to start something?"

“No lone-wolf stuff, but you have permission to probe a little bit,” Jefferys said.

“Yes, sir,” Kent answered.

Jefferys actually smiled as he hung up the receiver.

11. BAIT

Kent had been called away from a session with Dwyer to talk to his chief. He was smiling when he returned. Dwyer said:

“Good news?”

“Yes, I think so.” He sat down and the colonel returned to his charts.

“For your trip you will have a sealed cabin. The M-2 full-pressure suit will be used only for emergencies, such as repairs outside the vehicle, examination of the objective station, or cabin leakage caused by a puncture by a small meteorite.” Dwyer leaned back and reached for another sheet.

“I’ll be able to move around outside the capsule?” Kent asked.

“Yes, but you must be anchored by a line so as not to go into orbit. You will maneuver quite easily by means of jets fastened to your body.”

“That will be something,” Kent said.

“A recent development makes your stay up in space longer than it would have been a short few months ago,” Dwyer said. “Then, your oxygen supply would have been a critical factor. As you know, the old container would sustain a man for twenty-four hours. Not many tanks could be carried. At

Wright Air Development Center we have devised what we call a closed-oxygen system." He paused and stared at the sheet before him.

"No oxygen will dissipate outside the ship?" Kent asked.

"A pump will carry the exhaled breath to a chemical absorber to remove the carbon dioxide, after which the oxygen will be cooled, wringing out the moisture."

"You made one small enough to work in a space capsule?" Kent leaned forward, interested.

"Miniaturization of equipment was the problem we had to lick, and we licked it." Dwyer beamed proudly.

"Is there anything you can't do?" Kent asked with a grin.

"Quite a few things," the colonel said soberly. "But we're working on them." He got to his feet and flexed his arms. "How about a coffee break?"

As they started for the door Dwyer said, "Coffee break for you, upstairs for a word with a couple of chemists for me."

Kent found Spud in the coffee bar. He was munching on a candy bar and frowning. He looked up at Kent, took a bite, and said:

"This deal is just too tame for me. I'm lying around eating like a pig and getting fat."

"Not after tonight," Kent said with a grin. "Jefferys called me."

Spud sat up. "We're to do some detecting?"

Kent nodded. "The chief has Pender back there. He says Pender's approach is defensive. He wants some offensive thinking."

"I say let's give it to him." Spud got to his feet hurriedly.

"If we dangle a little bait the termites might come out of the woodwork," Kent said.

Spud grinned. "Like what kind of bait?"

"Me," Kent answered. "That's the way we solved the others."

"Pender'll never stand for it," Spud said gloomily.

"We've been cleared by Jefferys." Kent grinned. "No lone-wolf stuff, but it won't be lone wolf if you're along."

"I feel like a new man. I'll oil up my pistol and sharpen my wits."

"Oil mine at the same time. I have to go back for another session, but we'll get on with the bait deal tonight." Kent finished his coffee and left the room with Spud at his heels.

Colonel Dwyer had returned when Kent re-entered the briefing room. "Just a few odds and ends left for today," he said. "Tomorrow you can start being a pilot."

"That's what I've been waiting for," Kent said.

"There's not much we can do to prepare you for the foods you'll eat. But if you stay up longer than a couple of days you may not care for the diet."

"I'm not a choosy eater," Kent said.

"The meal just before flight will be high carbohydrates to increase tolerance to altitude. In flight, meals will consist of bland foods, tender meats, fish and fowl, strained vegetables." Dwyer smiled. "We can add chocolate drinks and fruit juices."

Kent nodded. He was having trouble keeping his mind on space food. It was back in the old groove probing, trying to guess what the other fellow would do. In a way, it was a relief to plot a little.

"That's about it for today," Dwyer said. "The mechanical wizards in space flight will have you mostly from now on, but you're still my—" He paused and smiled.

"—guinea pig," Kent finished for him.

They left the building together. Spud was waiting at the curb. Kent got in after saying good night to the colonel. Their route to the BOQ took them past a fenced area with steel buildings inside. Three men and two German shepherd dogs were working along the inside of the fence. One of them paused and stared at the car.

They pulled up at the BOQ and got out of the car. In their room they showered and then talked.

"We'll have dinner in Lompoc," Kent said. "If they have men on here, we might be spotted."

"Sort of a long shot." Spud was plainly disappointed.

"Do you have a hunch where the hangout is?" Kent asked.

"No," Spud admitted.

"You can shake Pender's men?"

"Sure. They don't expect us to shake them. I'll forget to slip them a tip that we're going to Lompoc." Spud grinned.

"Good. They'll expect us at the Officers' Club. We head straight for town." Kent knotted his tie. "Did you oil my gun?"

"Sure did." Spud pulled out a drawer and Kent saw his service revolver and shoulder holster inside. He took them out and fitted the holster and gun into place before slipping into his coat.

The drive to Lompoc was without incident, and they were not followed. Pender's men would wait at the club until after seven before wondering and starting to look for them.

Lompoc was not a large town but there were several good places to eat. They picked the Shell House as the most showy. Parking the car around a corner from the café as a precaution against Pender's men spotting it, they walked to the café.

There were not many customers and none of them looked like foreign agents. Kent's spirits were not dampened, but Spud said:

"Nobody here."

"We'll eat and drive around a bit," Kent said. "I'm sure they know your car."

They ordered steaks and started on a leisurely dinner. Kent relaxed and enjoyed his meal. They were eating orange ice when the redhead came in. She was with a tall young man of about twenty-five. They took a table across the room facing Kent and Spud. Spud stared at the redhead wistfully.

"Some doll," he said, noting the low-cut gown and the trim ankles.

Kent looked and nodded, then he looked again and grinned.

He dipped up a spoon of orange sherbet and concentrated upon it. He was aware that the redhead was looking at him.

"Just my luck that she's got a man with her," Spud said.

"Would you like her over at this table?" Kent asked without glancing at the girl.

"Sure would."

"Tell you what I'll do. I'll get her over here." Kent smiled, his eyes on his sherbet.

Spud gave him a quick look. He had never known Kent to try to make a pickup. "Yeah," he said. "That'll be a day to mark down in the Air Force calendar of events."

"When she comes she'll ask about me," Kent said.

Spud was completely baffled. "O.K., she'll ask about you."

"Then what'll you think?" Kent asked.

"That she's an agent." Spud laughed. "She's probably the innkeeper's daughter scrounging trade."

"I'll get up and leave. You order something else, more dessert, anything, but take your time." Kent got to his feet. "For this service you can pay the check." He sauntered to the door and left.

Spud stared after him, then he noticed the redhead was talking earnestly to her companion. Spud beckoned to a waitress and, when she came to his table, he ordered ice cream and cake.

Before the order came, the girl's companion had got to his feet and was leaving the café. Spud felt his pulse quicken. He looked at the girl, and their eyes met. She smiled at him, then got up and walked to his table.

"My friend has been called away, and it's lonesome eating alone," she said, and thrust out her red lower lip provocatively.

"Sit down and join me," Spud said. He got to his feet and pulled back the chair next to him.

"Thank you," the girl said as she sat down.

The waitress transferred the girl's silver and glass of water. The girl lifted the glass and sipped. "I used to be a USO girl," she said. "I'm used to meeting strange officers."

"I'm Murphy. My friends call me Spud." He grinned at her. "You?"

"I'm Ellen Miller from Grand Rapids. My friends call me Elly." She set her water glass down.

"Hello, Elly."

"Hello, Spud."

The waitress brought the girl's dinner, crab casserole. She dipped into it at once. "When I'm on the coast I always order sea food. West Coast crab, East Coast lobster."

"Crab's our dish out here," Spud agreed.

She took a liberal bite. "I'm glad our friends deserted us. Where did the tall captain go? Have a date?"

"Yeah, Kent has a date," Spud said indifferently.

"Next time we can make it a double date," she said. Then she laughed. "I'm a brazen gal, aren't I?" She gave him a wide smile.

"We'll do that," Spud said with enthusiasm. "How about tomorrow night?"

"How about tonight? Think you can contact him?" She fished a large bite of crab meat from her plate. "I'll be busy tomorrow night."

Spud thought fast. He was sure now that Kent had recognized the girl. He was a little worried because they had ditched Pender's men. They were on their own. But they had been on their own many times before.

"I'll try," he said. "There's a pay phone at the corner. Go ahead with dinner. I'll try calling him." He got to his feet and smiled down at her. "Don't run away."

"I won't," she promised.

Spud left the café and hurried down the street. He paused at the phone booth and looked back. There was no one on the street. Turning, he hurried around the corner, then halted. His car was gone. Suddenly the affair began to worry him. He turned and hurried back to the café.

Stepping inside, he looked toward the table he had eaten dinner at. The redhead was not there. Spud walked slowly across the room. He looked down at his check and Kent's. The waitress came over.

"Your friend was called away suddenly." She ripped the girl's check from her pad and laid it down on the table. "She said you'd pay."

Anger boiled up inside Spud, and more than anger, fear, not for himself but for Kent. There had been some fast work pulled. He laid a bill on the table.

"Keep the change," he said, and turned away. He had a phone call to make that he dreaded. He had to call Pender's office at once.

12. GROUNDED

When Kent left the café, he walked around to Spud's car and got in. He sat on the curb side, away from the wheel. He stretched his legs and relaxed. He had met Gail Weatherby again, and he was sure it wouldn't be the last time. Spud would double-date, probably for tomorrow night. They had been lucky in having the bait taken on the first try.

He heard a step beside the car and thought it was Spud. Then the door was jerked open and he felt a gun barrel jammed against his side.

"Slide over under the wheel. We want you dead so I'll shoot if you try anything. Lift your hands." The voice was harsh. Kent lifted his hands and turned his head. The man with the gun was the man he had seen in the café with the redhead.

The young man slid into the seat beside Kent and pulled Kent's service revolver out of its holster. He dropped the revolver into a side pocket.

"Drive down this street. Turn right at the second intersection." The gun barrel jabbed Kent sharply.

This was no time to argue. Kent had been in similar spots and knew all he could do would be to go along and hope for

a break. He started the car and drove down the street. His companion seemed highly pleased with himself.

“The great Kent Barstow. Sooner or later we all make a dumb slip.”

Kent did not answer. He was not deceived by the young man's easy manner. He was probably a top operator, ruthless and well schooled.

At the second block Kent turned right into a tree-lined street where the light was dim. He suddenly felt a hand on the steering wheel, and at the same instant pain exploded in his head. He had the sensation of whirling into a mass of red fire that quickly changed to blackness.

Kent regained consciousness slowly. He did not have any idea how long he had been unconscious or where he was. His head throbbed and he had trouble focusing his eyes. When his head cleared he found he was lying on an army cot. Neither his hands nor his ankles were bound, so he supposed he was in a locked room which his captors felt was escape-proof. He tried to sit up, but dizziness swept over him, and he lay back, closing his eyes.

It was then that he heard voices. Turning his head, he saw a small latticed ventilator. He could feel cool air coming through it. The opening was not more than a foot above his face. Trained as he was to remember details such as voices, he recognized the voice of the young man who had sapped him. The voice said:

“I admit it was mostly luck.”

Another voice, older and harsher, said, “It is the break we needed, Jones. But I have no use for him. He has no information we need.”

"Finishing him in town might have caused complications," Jones said.

"You did right. Now we go over plans for blasting their space capsule. This is your job."

"Now listen, Elkins," Jones protested. "That isn't a one-man job."

"But it is, and you do it. First you move in and the dog hears you. The sentry releases the dog. You use your whistle which the sentry can't hear. You reassure the dog and send him back to the sentry. Right so far?"

"Right. I'm outside the fence. The dog is aware I am a friend."

"You cut the fence. At that you are an expert, armed with the latest in cutters."

"Suppose it's an electric fence?" Jones asked.

"I have been thinking of that fence for some time. It is not electric."

"All right, so I'm inside."

"On the dark side as you approach there will be two sentries armed with machine guns." Elkins' voice was harsh, almost rasping. "In front there will be only one."

"But there will be a floodlight."

"You are a commando. No?"

"I know all of the tricks," Jones said sourly. "I'll be packing twenty pounds of short-time bomb. I have to leave it while I take this sentry. The timing is tight. I tell you that place crawls with sentries and roving guards."

"This job has to be done," Elkins said harshly.

"And I'm expendable."

"If you are clumsy about it, yes. If a second or third man shows up, you toss the bomb close to the installation with the control switched to contact."

"And blow myself up along with everything within a hundred yards." Jones' voice was tight.

"Are you refusing to do this?" Elkins' tone held an ominous threat.

There was a pause, then Jones said. "No. I'll do it. At 3:00 A.M. tomorrow morning, before Barstow shows up missing."

"Good. Neeta and I will be passing by and will pick you up."

"What about Barstow?" Jones asked.

"I'll have his car abandoned close enough to a highway to be spotted, but at least thirty miles from here. Finish him and dispose of the body."

"That will be easy. I'll do it at once."

Kent heard a chair scrape back and footsteps move across the floor of the adjoining room. He lay perfectly still with his eyes closed. Then he opened and closed his fingers. There wasn't much power in his hands.

Kent heard a door open and footsteps approaching the cot. Jones stopped close to the cot. Then he felt a savage jab in his ribs. He made no sound and held his body limp against the stabbing pain. Jones grunted.

"You sure are out."

Jones lifted a wrist and felt for Kent's pulse. "But still alive," Jones said.

He bent and lifted Kent. As Kent felt the strength in those arms he knew he had been wise not to try to struggle with

this man. Jones heaved Kent's limp body to a shoulder and moved away from the cot.

Jones carried Kent out of the house. Kent opened his eyes and saw as much of the surroundings as possible. He was in no danger of Jones' knowing his eyes were open because his head was against Jones' back. He heard dogs barking and, as they rounded a corner, he saw a row of kennels. They passed through a gate with a small sign on it which read:

JACOB DELROY

Trained German shepherd dogs

Jones dumped Kent into the back of a blue sedan. Kent relaxed and let his body pitch forward to the floor where he lay face up. Jones climbed in the front seat and started the car. He seemed confident that Kent was helpless.

As they moved along Kent tried to use his legs and arms. If he could summon enough strength he might be able to take Jones. He was an expert at judo and knew as many commando tricks as there were. But there was no power in his body. Jones had really sapped him, not caring whether he killed him or not.

Jones drove quite a distance over rough road which could not have been surfaced. Finally he stopped the car and got out. This was it. His body had to function now. Jones lighted a cigarette and smoked it as he peered into the back of the car. Kent lay inert and apparently helpless. Kent could smell the pungent smoke as Jones bent over him and blew a lungful into his face. He had to exercise all of his will power to keep from coughing.

"End of the road for you, Barstow," Jones said as he jerked open the door.

Through slitted eyes Kent saw the face of his enemy and the hands reaching for him. From one wrist dangled a length of heavy iron pipe attached to a loop of leather. Jones wasn't risking a shot. He was depending upon one vicious but expert blow, possibly several.

As Jones jerked him out of the car, Kent saw that they were on the edge of a steep bank which pitched down into brush and trees. He steadied himself so that Jones did not have to hold him upright. He had only to steady Kent.

"Coming around a bit," Jones said harshly.

Kent raised one foot until he felt the sill under the car door. He saw Jones' arm come raising the length of pipe, and as the pipe slashed toward his head he rolled a little and thrust with the foot which was against the car. He felt the terrific impact of the pipe as it hit him. The force of his kick sent him out and over the bank.

He knew he was rolling and tumbling and he let himself go so that Jones would think he was watching a dead man tumbling down the hillside. He hit bushes and smashed through them. Thorns ripped at his flesh and tore his clothing. He finally came to rest against a tree. Turning his head, he tried to see Jones up on top of the bank. He could see nothing. He lay still, waiting and listening.

Presently he heard a car engine start and the clash of shifting gears. He lay and listened until the sound of the car died away. Slowly he sat up, a tight grin on his lips. His hand raised, and he examined the welt on his shoulder. The collarbone wasn't broken. He had rolled his head just enough

to avoid a fatal blow at the base of his spine. He was sure Jones thought that was where the blow had landed. He was thankful that Jones was the type who believed he never missed. Kent's problem now was to get to a traveled road. The prospects did not look good. He was so weak he had to hold on to the tree to stand up.

13. SABOTAGE

Spud got Captain Carson, Pender's second in command. The instant Spud identified himself Captain Carson cut in.

"Where is Barstow?"

"I don't know," Spud said.

Carson broke in again. "Didn't you stay with him?"

"We had dinner at the Shell House in Lompoc. Kent went out to the car. He and the car have vanished."

"Did he go off on a lone-wolf chase?" Carson's voice was rising.

"We stumbled on to something," Spud admitted. "But he didn't plan to go off by himself."

"Someone spotted him?"

"Yes."

"I'll send a man for you. In the meantime we'll alert police and highway patrol. There'll be an all-points alert for your car and for Barstow." Carson broke the connection.

Carson put two men on phones to alert civil authorities and another to get his own organization rolling. Then he called Washington.

The telephone wire almost smoked when Jefferys got the report. Pender was on his way back to Vandenberg and would

land in a couple of hours. Jefferys' anger was more at himself than at his force on the West Coast. It was he who had suggested Kent do a little investigating on his own. Apparently Kent had done what he always did, go out and start something. Ordinarily that would have suited Jefferys, but not under the present circumstances. What increased his irritation was that there was nothing he could do. It was up to Pender and his men.

Out in Lompoc, Spud sat just inside the Shell House Café. He seated himself in a chair by a window in the lobby where people waited for the tables when the café was crowded. He stared moodily into the street. He felt guilty, even though he had done what he was supposed to do, go along with Kent. He had even obeyed Kent's instructions and stayed in the café to meet the girl.

He was considering the possibility that Kent had spotted the girl's confederates and tailed them in the car. He was thinking about this when he noticed the man. He was leaning forward looking into a display window across the street. He stood in deep shadow, and Spud might have missed him if the lights of a passing car hadn't revealed him clearly for a few seconds. Spud watched the man who was now shrouded in shadow. The man turned away from the window, but he did not walk away. He stood looking across the street. Pretended to be looking into an unlighted display window when the car came along, Spud thought grimly.

Spud was an old hand at stake-outs himself. He could spot one unless it was well covered. This fellow wasn't too good. He had failed to take passing cars into consideration. Spud felt a surge of relief. Here was action, something he

could get going on. It might be a big step toward rescuing Kent if he had been surprised and driven away.

The man across the street was Porter. He had come to town with Neeta and Jones. When Neeta called Elkins he had ordered Porter to watch the café and phone if any of Pender's men came to pick up Spud. That way he would know if an alert was out for Barstow.

Spud got up and left the café. He sauntered across the street at an angle. He took his time and never so much as glanced at the deep shadow where Porter stood flattened against a wall. When he reached the far sidewalk, he walked on until he came to a corner. He turned the corner and stood against the wall of a building.

Spud had to wait only a few minutes until he heard footsteps hurrying toward the corner. Porter wasn't a trained operator, he was a dog specialist. He barged around the corner and Spud nabbed him, pinning his arms to his sides. Spud always preferred the barehanded attack. He hadn't bothered to pull his gun.

Porter was husky and no stranger to alley fights. He brought up a knee and broke Spud's hold, but he wasn't able to claw the automatic from inside his coat. Spud's right fist exploded against his jaw, slamming him back against the wall. Then Spud bored in. He knew he had a tough customer on his hands, but fury filled him. Here was someone who had had a hand in abducting Kent.

Porter heaved himself away from the wall and started slugging on his own. They stood toe to toe, disregarding defense, fists slammed into flesh, and both men grunted under the impact of the blows. Porter was hard as nails and usually

a match for any man, but he had never tangled with an infighter like Spud. Spud worked on the body with only an occasional right cross to the face. Porter started to double over to protect his mid section and it was then that a right caught him on the point of the chin. His knees wobbled and he fell face down.

Spud stood over him wiping his bloody lips. He heard voices shouting and knew that a crowd would soon gather. Porter stirred and started to push himself to a sitting position. When he sat up he shook his head and looked up at Spud out of glassy eyes.

“What you mean, jumpin’ me?” he muttered.

Before Spud could answer three men and a girl rushed up. One of the men stared down at Porter. The other two looked at Spud. The girl let out a small scream. The man looking at Porter turned to Spud.

“Did he jump you, buddy?”

Somehow the term “buddy” irritated Spud. Just because he was in uniform the man called him buddy.

“I jumped him,” he said curtly.

At that moment a police car pulled up and two officers leaped out with drawn guns. They stopped close to Spud. One of them looked at the oak leaves on Spud’s jacket.

“What goes on here, Major?” he asked.

“Arrest this man and hold him.” Spud stepped close to the police officer. He slid a leather case from his pocket and flipped it open. The officer looked at it.

“We had an all-points bulletin,” he said. “That’s what brought us here.”

"Some of our men are on the way. Could you hold him for them?"

The officer smiled. "Simple assault ought to do it."

The officer looked down at Porter who was still seated on the sidewalk. "Get on your feet, hands high," he ordered.

Porter stared up at the two policemen but he didn't move. "This is a frame," he snarled.

The officer who had done the talking nodded to his companion. "Get him on his feet, Charlie."

Charlie moved around behind Porter and expertly stooped to slide his hands under Porter's arms. Porter went for his gun. Before he had depended upon his fists; in this situation he needed the automatic. The gun came out, but Spud's toe caught it and sent it spinning.

"Nice work, Major," the officer beside him said calmly.

Spud glanced at the service revolver in the officer's hand and knew the man being hoisted to his feet was lucky to be alive. The officer was too far away to do what Spud had done, but he had been ready for just such a play as Porter had made.

Charlie expertly slapped Porter down and found a knife. When he pulled it from Porter's belt, he looked at it distastefully.

"We got us a real tough guy here, Hank," he said to his superior.

"Check him out for identification," Spud suggested.

Hank glanced around at the throng of curious people. "Heave him in the car. We'll do it there." He looked at Spud. "Where will your men pick you up?"

"At the Shell House Café," Spud answered.

Charlie shoved Porter into the police car and got in beside him. Spud walked around and got in on the other side, sitting next to the man. He wanted to be close to him. There were questions he wanted answered.

Hank drove the car around and parked it in front of the Shell House Café. He leaned out and spoke to several people who had crossed the street and were moving in to watch.

"The show's over, folks," Hank said. "Move along."

Reluctantly the little crowd moved on. Charlie turned to Porter. "Empty your pockets," he ordered.

Porter knew there was no use to resist further. He also knew that this was a bad break for him. There was one very slim thread of consolation. What the United States government would do to him would be mild compared to what Pardin would do to him if he was released. He handed over a metal clip fastened over a sizable sheaf of folded bills, a cigarette lighter, and half a pack of cigarettes.

Charlie looked at the things Porter fished from his pockets and frowned. "No driver's license, no identification?" he asked gruffly.

Porter shrugged his shoulders. Spud leaned over and swiftly went through the man's pockets. There was no wallet. The pockets were empty.

"You may as well talk," he said. "We'll identify you."

Porter remained silent. Hank leaned over the seat. "You have to give us a name and address."

"I'm not talking," Porter said, and clamped his lips shut.

At that moment a car skidded around a corner and roared to where the police car stood. It ground to a stop. Spud rec-

ognized two of Pender's men, Drury and Sims. The Intelligence men jumped from their car. Drury reached the police car first.

"What have you got here?" He stared at Porter.

"I grabbed one of them. He was shadowing me," Spud explained. "But he won't talk."

Sims halted besides Drury. "Think he knows where Barstow is?" he asked sharply.

"I'm sure he does," Spud said.

"Then we'll make him talk," Sims said harshly. He was Drury's senior and in charge of the detail. "Can we have him, Officer?" He spoke to Hank.

"So far as I'm concerned he's yours," Hank said. All he could book the surly prisoner for would be assault with a deadly weapon.

Charlie got out of the car and faced Porter. "You go with these federal men," he said as he reached in and gripped Porter's arm.

Porter did not resist. He climbed into the back seat of the government car. Spud got in beside him. He was irritated and worried. Unless this fellow talked, the delay might be disastrous for Kent.

14. RUGGED TRAIL

Kent leaned against the tree and breathed deeply. He shook his head slowly in an attempt to clear the fog from his brain. It was so dark that he could not see the face of his wrist watch. He fumbled in a pocket, knowing as he did so that he would not find a match. For once the smoking habit seemed to have some virtue. If you smoked, you carried matches.

Slowly he began to remember. That was a good sign because it indicated that the concussion was losing its grip on his mind. Jones had said he planned to strike on the base at three o'clock. What time was it now? He did not know how long he had lain unconscious in the house with the barking dogs. His ride with Jones could not have lasted for more than twenty minutes. What he must do was move up to the road. If he could get back to that house, he might be able to stop Jones. He had to make the try.

Kent pushed himself away from the tree and started toward the steep bank. When he reached it and started up he knew he couldn't walk up the bank so he dropped to his hands and knees. With the help of bushes and shrubs, he inched his way upward. When he finally reached the top he sat on the edge of the bank for a few minutes.

The light was better up on the road and his head was clearing. He was able to make out the time. It was five minutes after eleven. With a grunt he heaved himself to his feet and started plodding up the road. The grade added to his trouble. He thought a little of the weightlessness of space would be wonderful at the moment.

As he climbed he considered how he would handle Jones and the man called Elkins. They would both be armed and more than ready to shoot. There might be others with them. The best way would be to phone and alert Pender's office. But there wasn't time to find a telephone. The nearest place he was sure of was the house he had been taken to. He'd just have to plan as he went along.

The walking helped revive him. He increased his speed a little. The throbbing at the back of his head had subsided. He was in perfect physical condition so that his body was making a fast recovery. He glanced at his watch, holding it close to his face. He had been walking for an hour. Coming over a hill, he looked down and saw a light far below.

If he didn't get to the hideout before Jones left, he'd have to find a phone. This was rugged wooded country and the hideout was likely to be in an isolated location. Kent broke into a trot, pumping his arms like a long-distance runner.

Presently he heard the faint barking of dogs. The barking lasted only a few minutes, but it warned Kent that approach to the place would be difficult with guard dogs in kennels close to it. He ran on, breathing easily, not pushing himself to the point where his breath became short.

As he neared the buildings he knew he was approaching it from the rear, away from the kennels. There was light in

two back windows and two cars were parked in the rear. That was a hopeful sign.

Kent approached the cars first. One was an almost-new Buick, the other was a Ford, and it was older. Kent guessed that the Ford was the car Jones would drive. He moved to it as noiselessly as he could. Kneeling, he felt around the inside of the rim until he found the valve stem. He unscrewed the cap and used its slotted tip to remove the valve core. Air hissed out, and as the car settled it creaked.

There was a low growl from the kennels out in front, then a sharp bark. Kent ducked and dived into a circle of shrubbery. If Jones was inside, he would understand the bark of a dog that had spotted the presence of an intruder. Kent hoped the dog had only been disturbed by the creaking of the car springs. He peered out of the shrubbery and watched the back door of the house.

The door opened and Jones was framed in the light from the room. He had a revolver in his hand. Swiftly he moved out into the yard and around to the front of the house. Anger tightened Kent's stomach muscles as he watched the man who had slugged him and tried to kill him. He had a score to settle with Jones. Then he felt relief. Jones hadn't left yet.

Kent heard Jones speak to the dogs. The one that had barked quieted down. After a bit Jones came back and entered the house. Kent eased out of the shrubbery. There was one thing in his favor so far as the dogs went, the wind was blowing toward him. He approached the Buick, and this time he didn't completely remove the valve core. The air escaped from the tire slowly.

His trick would at best delay Jones and Elkins a little

while. There would be spares. He thought of letting the air out of them, but was sure that the luggage compartment, at least on the Buick, would be locked. He stood for a minute considering, then went around to the rear of the Buick and loosened another valve. He did the same with the Ford.

Now it was time to scout the house. Whoever was up was in the back rooms. He circled, not wanting to approach close to the door. The night was warm, and the window next to the door was open a foot. Moving around a corner, he stopped to study two lighted windows. He stepped away from the house and saw that both were open but screened. He eased back to the wall of the house and slid along it until he came to the window frame. Inching forward, he paused with his face against the frame. Looking inside would be taking a chance, but he had to do it. Then he heard a girl's voice. Gail Weatherby, or Neeta, as the man Elkins had called her, was in the room.

"The big major was nice, a real sucker," she said, and laughed.

Jones answered her, his voice harsh. "Too bad you didn't have time to work on him."

Neeta laughed again. "I stuck him with my dinner check."

"We better get going." That was Elkins' voice.

"We better time it close," Jones answered. "I don't want to be hanging around waiting."

"Did Porter call in?" Neeta asked.

"No," Elkins said. "He's not trained for that sort of thing. He may have lost the major."

"He's probably still hanging around that café. The major may have hitched a ride," Neeta said.

Kent eased his head forward until he could get a quick look into the room. Neeta lay on a davenport, Elkins sat in a big chair, his side to the window. Jones was straddling a kitchen chair, his back to the window. Kent checked the rest of the room. On a stand near him lay Kent's service revolver. The stand was close to the window across the room. Kent considered his chances of getting the revolver. The window screen looked old and rotten, but it might be copper or even synthetic fiber, and resistant to a hard jab. He decided to move around and hope for a break.

At that moment Jones got to his feet. Kent pulled back, but Jones didn't face the window. Kent looked, and Jones was crossing to the stand where the revolver lay. He picked it up and hefted it, then raised it, pointing it at the wall.

"Shame to throw this into the ocean," he said.

"That's where it goes," Elkins snapped. "We leave no loose ends lying about."

Jones put the gun back on the stand and crossed the room to a closet which he opened. He bent over and when he turned he was holding a leather case about a foot high and wide and some eighteen inches long. It seemed quite heavy. He carried it to a table, and Kent ducked back. Jones was now facing the window.

Kent felt his way around the house to the window next to the stand. When he peeped into the room Jones' back was to him, but Elkins was in a position from which he could see the window. All Kent could see of Neeta was the top of her head and the reflection of her knees in a wall mirror across the room. She had them pulled up and her hands were clasped around them.

Kent watched Jones. He had opened the case and was fooling with dials inside it. Elkins had turned his head and was watching him.

"You say this is something like an atom bomb?" Jones looked toward Elkins.

"That's what it is," Elkins said. "You step lively after you set the timer."

"I'll step lively," Jones answered.

Kent drew back and poked a finger around the window frame. He pressed hard, then scratched a little. The screen gave, and his finger told him it was rusty, but the finger didn't break through.

Kent eased forward again and looked into the room, checking everything. Jones was in his shirt sleeves. The straps of his shoulder holster creased the back of his shirt. Kent's eyes moved along the wall. There was a wall phone close to the door.

Kent was studying the door and the phone when Neeta suddenly sat up. "There's a man at the window!" she shouted.

Kent acted fast. He smashed his fist against the screen and felt it rip. Putting all of his weight on his left arm, he reached into the room, his fingers closing over the butt of his gun. The room seemed to explode into action. Jones whirled, his hand darting to his holster, Elkins leaped out of his chair, and before he was on his feet he had a gun out. Neeta dived to the floor behind the davenport.

Jones' gun blasted and bucked. Wood splintered from the window frame close to Kent's head, but Kent had leaped aside. He heard Elkins' gun roar and saw the ragged hole

the bullet made in the screen. It would have been dead center in his chest if he hadn't moved fast.

"You're trapped like rats!" Kent shouted. "Smash in the door, boys!"

He took a chance and looked into the room. Both Elkins and Jones had jerked around to look at the door. It was natural for them to believe that there would be more than one man on a raid. Kent ripped the screen aside. He stood outside the window, his gun covering Jones and ready to swing on Elkins.

"It's a trick!" Neeta screamed. "If there were more than one why would he have to steal a gun?" Her head showed briefly above the back of the davenport.

Jones and Elkins whirled but they did not fire. A strange look came over Jones' face, one of disbelief, almost wonder.

"It's him! You said you killed him!" Neeta screamed. "You bungling idiot." She started slithering across the floor toward an inside door. Kent let her go.

"Drop your guns," Kent ordered. When they both hesitated, he snapped, "I'm in the mood to shoot you both."

Elkins dropped his first, then Jones.

"Hands up," Kent ordered harshly. He wondered briefly why he hadn't shot Jones. The man deserved it, he was a cold-blooded killer. Kent heaved the window wider open and swung a leg over the frame. An instant later he was inside the room. Elkins and Jones stood with hands raised. Elkins' face was a greenish hue. Jones' registered only hate.

"Over against the wall. Face it. Hands at the back of your heads." Kent kept an eye on the open door through which

Neeta had vanished. He knew he was still in a tight spot. There could be others she might arouse.

Then he heard a motor roar. Neeta was taking care of herself, but she wouldn't get far in either of the cars in the back yard. Kent moved toward the wall phone. Keeping the two men covered, he dialed Pender's clear line which was used only for emergencies.

Jones and Elkins stood at the wall near him with their hands back of their heads. Like a pair of rats, Kent thought, when they're trapped they go yellow. Then he heard Pender's voice.

"Barstow. I have two saboteurs lined up against a wall."

Pender's voice was high-pitched. "You all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Where are you?"

"I'm not sure, but the place is Jacob Delroy's German shepherd kennels according to the sign on the gate. This could get a bit sticky if there are any more of them about."

At that moment Delroy came charging in. "What's going on here?" he shouted, then he halted and stared at Kent and then at Elkins and Jones. His eyes dropped to the two guns on the floor.

"Get over there and join them," Kent said, and swung his gun around to bear on Delroy.

The big man's eyes bulged and his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "I ain't done nothing," he whined.

"Get over against the wall!" Kent snapped. From the dangling receiver he heard Pender's excited voice. Delroy started moving across the room. Kent caught up the receiver. "Another one just showed up."

"Hold on. We'll be there fast," Pender said, and hung up.

Kent slipped the bolt on the back door. He seated himself away from the window after closing the inside door. He wondered how Neeta was making out with a flat front tire and a flat rear. He grinned. She'd probably make out, being a very capable young lady.

Elkins eased his hands down to his neck. "Can't we sit down?" he croaked.

Kent considered the request for a minute. "You can all sit down on the floor." He got to his feet and collected the revolvers.

The three men turned around and seated themselves on the floor with their backs to the wall. Kent listened intently. Now he was glad to have the guard dogs outside. If anyone approached, the dogs would warn him.

Kent did not bother to question the three men. That was Pender's job, and he had men trained for that work. But he studied them as they sat scowling bleakly. Elkins, he guessed, was the boss. Jones was the actual operator. Delroy probably knew very little of what was going on. But he had a feeling the kennel owner would be the one who would talk.

It was a long wait, but at last the dogs sounded off and a car drove into the yard. Kent got to his feet and unbolted the outside door. He opened it and stood waiting.

Five men appeared moving fast. Spud and Pender were in the lead. Kent stepped back to let them enter. Pender stood for a moment looking at the three men seated on the floor, then turned to Kent with a smile.

"What were they up to?" he asked.

Kent nodded toward the leather case on the table. "One of

them was to plant a nice little atom bomb inside the enclosure where Z-1 is housed." Kent pointed to Jones. "He was to make the delivery at three this morning."

"How'd he plan to get past the guards?" Spud asked.

"He trained the guard dogs they are using."

"That's a new one," Pender said. "How did you happen to learn all of this and trail them?"

Kent grinned at Jones. "The young man called Jones kidnaped me while I was waiting in the car for Spud. Caught me flatfooted."

"You said we were bait." Spud grinned. "You sure were."

"Jones was supposed to finish me off but he missed." Kent lifted a hand to the back of his head. "Jones is one of those sure-of-himself guys. When he saps a man, that man has to be dead."

Pender turned to his three operatives. "Cuff them and load them into car two. Be very careful of that leather case. Deliver it to base headquarters. Murphy and I will run Barstow in to the hospital."

"The girl got away in a new Buick, but she probably didn't drive it far. I let the air out of two tires." Kent laughed.

"She owes me a dollar sixty-five," Spud said. "And I aim to collect it."

They stepped back and let the Intelligence men march the prisoners outside. Pender detained the last man. "You better stay here. I'll send a detail out to take this place apart." He glanced around the room thoughtfully and shook his head. "Jefferys sure started something when he called you on the phone, Barstow."

They walked outside and headed for Pender's car. Kent

was glad he was going back to being an astronaut. The night's experience had been more rugged than he had liked, certainly a lot of things had happened faster than he had expected. He didn't want to go to the hospital, but knew he'd have to be checked over. What he wanted was a hot shower and some sleep.

15. PRE-FLIGHT

Pender called before Kent left his room at BOQ. Spud was already at Pender's office.

Pender called before Kent left his room at BOQ. Spud was already at Pender's office.

"We picked up your girl friend," Pender said. "Nabbed her trying to get a filling-station man to deliver two tires."

"I didn't think she'd get far," Kent answered.

"Want to sit in while we ask her a few questions?"

"Like to," Kent said.

"Number ten across from my office." There was a click as Pender hung up.

Kent postponed breakfast to go to the Intelligence office. He was being given a day to recover from his experiences of the night before. He had protested, but even Jefferys had insisted. Jefferys was highly pleased, even though he realized that he might easily have lost the one man so much depended upon.

Pender and two of his men were in Room 10 when Kent entered, but it was Neeta Kristoff who interested him. She sat beside a desk, her hand clasped in her lap. She was far from the sweet little girl he had met on the plane. She looked

hard and angry. She met his gaze as he walked toward her with hate flickering in her eyes.

"Hello, Gail Weatherby," Kent said with a smile.

"Sucker," she spat at him. "You'll never get into space."

Kent shook his head sadly. "Now, Gail, that's no way to talk."

She clamped her lips into a tight line and ignored him. Kent seated himself beside Matt Drury, a lank operator whose face was liberally sprinkled with freckles. Drury was perhaps the sharpest question man in the department. Bill Sims sat on the other side. He was the silent-observer type. Along with Pender they had spent hours questioning Elkins, Jones, Porter, and Delroy. None of them had gotten any sleep, and it showed. Pender sat back of his desk. Drury started the questioning.

"Your name is Neeta Kristoff."

Neeta just stared at him. He smiled and pulled at the lobe of one ear.

"You have been working under orders from Nicol Pardin. You can make it easy on yourself or tough. Answer our questions and we'll treat you fair."

Neeta settled herself more comfortably. She seemed about to yawn. Drury went on talking in a conversational voice.

"You just told Captain Barstow that he'd never get into space. Any reason for that statement?"

Neeta glanced at Kent. "He's too dumb," she said.

Drury was patient. He kept on asking questions, mentioning names the department knew about, making a few shrewd guesses, trying to trick her into revealing some scrap of information. But Neeta was bright and she was well trained.

She was also aware that these Americans did not use third-degree tortures to get answers.

Kent finally tired of the show. He lifted a hand to Drury as he headed for the door. There was a lot he wanted to do that was more interesting than listening to the three officers ask questions that got no answers.

There was a lot yet to be done, and time was closing in, pushing him swiftly toward the hour when he would pit what he had learned, the skills he had newly acquired, against forces unknown. It irritated him that Colonel Dwyer had been the most insistent of all the medics who had examined him that he just take it easy for one day. How could he take it easy? He could easily forget the foreign agents who had tried to wreck his flight plans, but he wasn't able to push out of his mind a hundred things he wanted to know more about.

He paused outside the gate leading to the blockhouse where his space vehicle rested. He knew he couldn't get past the two young men at the gate. Even if they did happen to know him, they would not pass him without the proper escort. He wondered idly where Spud was. Moving along, he turned in at the coffee shop. He might as well have the solace of coffee while he brooded.

Spud spotted him in the coffee shop. Before he went in to join Kent, he made a telephone call. Leaving the phone, he sauntered in and crossed to the table where Kent sat.

Kent looked up at his pal. "Where you been?" he asked shortly.

Spud sank into a chair. "Here and there. Mostly checking the security record of some guard dogs." Spud grinned. "Did you know there was a security check on dogs?"

"If there isn't there will be from now on," Kent said sourly.

"What's eating you?" Spud asked.

"I'm wasting a day," Kent grumbled. "I should be being briefed on controls today."

"That's tough." Spud didn't act very sympathetic. "You get all shook up last night and want to go right on without a breather. Why don't you take a swim, lie in the sun, relax?"

Kent scowled at his friend. "Why don't you get lost?" His eyes strayed to the open door and quickly narrowed. Jefferys was striding through the doorway.

The colonel moved toward Kent's table without a glance around the room. Grimly Kent watched his boss approach. He wondered what Jefferys wanted. It wasn't like the chief to look up one of his men. His way was to send for them.

Jefferys halted beside the table and looked down at Kent, his steely eyes intent upon Kent's face. A big hand reached out and pulled a chair away from the table. Jefferys sat down. Before he said a word he got out his pipe and tobacco pouch. As he stuffed the bowl he said:

"I said no lone-wolf activities."

Kent stared at the granite face across the table from him. "Circumstances beyond my control," he said harshly.

Jefferys' lips parted in a thin smile just before they closed on the pipe stem. "You set everything up so that circumstances would take over."

Kent suddenly felt better. He grinned at Jefferys. "Habit. Past training," he said.

Jefferys nodded. "You probably saved this mission from failure. I had a feeling desperate measures had to be taken."

He paused to hold a kitchen match over the bowl of his pipe. Kent waited, knowing more was coming.

“One of your friends has talked.”

“Which one?”

“Jones.”

Kent considered this news. Jones had seemed like a hard, competent agent. Yet, there had been something about him that didn't quite fit. He looked at Jefferys inquiringly.

“Why?”

“He's a type. Big ego. Jones considered himself infallible. Two things shook him up. First you tricked him and lived. Second he was tricked on one of the oldest gags in this business.” Jefferys puffed deeply. “When you shouted to the nonexistent backers to break in the door, he turned and gave you a chance to cover him. He's also the brooding type. He brooded and broke down.”

“So you cleaned up?” Kent leaned forward.

“We picked up a Nicol Pardin and four helpers, all well equipped and well hidden.”

“That wipes them out,” Spud said.

Jefferys glared at him. “Never depend upon an assumption like that,” he snapped.

Spud flushed and shifted his feet. Kent smiled. He had a feeling the plot to thwart him was shattered, but he knew Jefferys wouldn't take anything for granted.

“You go back under tight security as of now,” Jefferys stated.

Kent glanced around the room and spotted two of Pender's men. They were apparently interested in a shelf of sweet rolls; each held a cup of coffee. They were in civilian clothes,

but Kent could easily detect the bulge of their shoulder holsters. He sighed as he shoved his cup aside.

“Guess I’ll just relax for the rest of the day,” he said.

“Do that.” Jefferys got to his feet and strode away from the table.

“We got company,” Spud said.

Kent nodded. “We’ll relax here for a while. It wouldn’t be polite to drag them away from their rolls and coffee.”

16. COUNTDOWN

Kent was not familiar with Vandenberg AFB. Under stress of a cold war, the missile age was hurtling along at a dizzy pace. In two and a half years United States Army's deserted and crumbling Camp Cooke had been transformed into the Free World's first operational missile base, with Thor, Atlas, Titan, and Minuteman squadrons ready to hurl war heads to targets any place in the world on less than fifteen minutes' notice. Vandenberg's sixty-four thousand acres of hilly and flat land were dotted with poised silver missiles, their nose cones pointing skyward, while others lay horizontal in sheds waiting to be swung upright. Still others, like the Titan, were housed in deep, concrete-lined holes with hundred-ton doors overhead. They could be raised in minutes, fueled, and sent on their way.

Vandenberg was a complex of seven thousand civilian and six thousand military personnel, with an added fifteen hundred British R. A. F. trainees usually on hand. Operations were scattered miles apart, and the hills were dotted with huge white balls inside which there was a complex of electronic machinery, much of it small and compact. These were the eyes and ears and voice of the base. They tracked, checked, and controlled the flight of a missile. One of them would be

responsible for seeing that Kent got safely into space where he would take over control. And back of the round white balls were the men in the control room deep in a blockhouse. The miracle of the white balls depended upon the brains of men who had created the intricate complex. Millions of man-hours of work and thought had gone into the making and assembling of the delicate machines, and millions more man-hours had gone into checking and testing. One misplaced connection, one small defect, could destroy a two-million-dollar space craft before it even left the pad. A mistake could not be corrected, except in a matter of seconds during which time the operation could be halted. The tricky oxygen which was used to fire the kerosene-like fuel had to be handled with the care used in a nitroglycerine plant. The paper-thin shell of the missile had to be provided with inside pressure or it would collapse like a cellophane bag deflated of air.

There was beauty, deadly beauty at Vandenberg, and there were dedicated men, each as much so as Kent himself. Kent and Spud stood close to a launching pad. They had just finished a tour of the actual site from which Kent would take off. Kent looked up at the towering Atlas. The silver shaft rose hundreds of feet above him. Its polished surface did not have a single blemish, although closer inspection showed the heads of thousands of rivets put in place so carefully that they needed no polishing.

Spud shook his head. He was more than a little bit envious of Kent. "Quite a bird," he said.

The colonel who was with them nodded. "The Atlas has had twenty-one consecutive successful launchings." He turned to Kent. "You'll get up there, Barstow."

"I'm sure I will," Kent agreed.

They turned away from the pad and stood at the brow of a hill. On their right at some distance was the blockhouse, and on its left was the ready room. On their left was the service-tower parking area, no longer used now that new scaffolding had been installed. Runways for water furrowed the slope.

Small groups of men were at work, but none other than Kent would be closer to the Atlas than twenty-five hundred feet when it was fired. There would be no casualties among the men, but there would be casualties, expensive ones. Radio cameras would melt, but not before their messages had been sent and recorded. The hunger for facts would never be satisfied. Even on a flight like this one the engineers and scientists would be looking for hints to help them improve take-off. Cameras that would survive would trail the first upward surge of the Atlas.

Without another word the three officers turned and started down the man-made hill toward the staff car. Kent glanced toward the security fence and remembered the vicious attempts which had been made to prevent his flight. Throughout the base in general security was not tight, but here it was the tightest used on any area. SAC's flight-line security could not compare with it, though it was based on flight-line methods.

They drove to the ready room, and entered. There was nothing left to do but wait for the signal to enter the capsule. Every problem had been thought of, every expected move had been done in the simulator a hundred times. If one item had been missed, it would not be discovered until the prob-

lem it posed appeared. Then Kent would have to find the answer himself. He glanced at his watch. One half-hour until suit-up time.

Deep underground in the control room men were checking, running through every step of the procedure which would be followed. It was like the time before take-off in a jet, only more complicated, and Kent wasn't in on this part. He'd do a cockpit check after he boarded the capsule, but right now there was nothing he could do.

Spud sensed the tension, but he didn't talk. If Kent wanted to talk, Spud would be glad to go along with him, but this was Kent's show and he'd do it his way. Actually Kent wasn't thinking about the Atlas at all, he was wondering what Jefferys would do about Neeta Kristoff. It was a trick he had learned a long time ago. Think about some other knotty problem. Suddenly he grinned. He wondered what Jefferys would do if he asked that question out of space. He glanced across at Spud. Spud was looking at pictures in *Life* magazine.

He was surprised at the fast passage of time when the signal came through for him to suit up and go aboard. There was a stir around him, a hurried but purposeful activity. Kent got to his feet and smiled at Spud.

"This is it," he said.

"Up there with the birds," Spud said, trying for a light touch.

Kent went into the locker room and started getting into the space suit. Spud went along to help him. In a short time he was ready. Both had checked the outfit with care. Kent moved out through the larger room and on to the waiting car.

The climb to the nose cone was slow. Kent did not hurry.

Airmen waited to lock him in. They regarded him gravely as they helped him into his cramped quarters. Everything inside, every button, lever, and gauge was familiar to him. He had worked all of them a hundred times. He settled back and fastened his safety straps, got his body into an easy posture, his hands and arms placed right for the pre-flight check.

A voice from the control room said, "Scout One. Ready for check."

"Roger," Kent answered, and started through the check list. The acts and actions were familiar, although he had never actually done them at a time like this.

"Control room?" he said after he was through. "Scout One ready."

"Scout One hold for countdown," the control room answered.

Kent relaxed and waited. He could visualize what was going on in the control room and on the pad. The huge eight-story tower had been cleared. All personnel had moved out to the safety zone, and a safety check had been made to be sure.

Colonel Reed, flight conductor, would be saying, "T minus thirty-five minutes and counting."

Observers from a distance saw white plumes rise from high on the missile, indicating that the vent valve had been opened.

Inside the control room Colonel Reed's steady voice said, "T minus fifteen minutes and counting."

Control engineers and personnel tensed and waited.

"T minus ten minutes and counting."

Colonel Reed turned, bending his head. The Range Safety

Officer was reporting, "Weather favorable." Reed gave his attention to a few more details about the missile.

Spud sat in the control room and watched Colonel Reed and his men. He could have been in a blockhouse from which he could see the eighty-foot Atlas flame off its pad, but he did not want to be there. He remembered that time at Cape Canaveral when he had escorted a group of newsmen to see a shoot which was planned to place a satellite in orbit. The memory of that giant missile toppling over and twisting and writhing as flames enveloped it and destroyed it came vividly to his mind. That big bird had not had a man in its nose cone. The Atlas outside on its pad had a passenger, Spud's best friend. He was aroused from his brooding thoughts by the voice of Colonel Reed.

"T minus two minutes and counting."

Spud leaned forward and watched one of the control panels as the operators tensely activated switches which placed electrical circuits in action. The internal-power sources in the giant outside were now ready. Reed's voice came over.

"T minus one minute fifteen seconds and counting."

Colonel Reed moved. Spud's eyes followed him as he checked several panel operators. He could feel sweat forming inside the palms of his hands. Time seemed to have stopped. He knew the clock was ticking off the seconds when Colonel Reed's voice broke the thick silence.

"Missile power."

"Go," answered the voice of a panel operator.

Spud stiffened. He knew he could hear nothing here in the control room, and for an instant he wished he had gone on lookout at the blockhouse. Outside three hundred and eighty

thousand pounds of thrust were about to lift the two-hundred-and-sixty-pound Atlas off the pad. Reed's voice went on, unchanged, steady:

"AMR telemetry."

"Go," droned the panel operator.

"Propulsion."

"Go." Like an echo.

"T minus sixty seconds and counting." Colonel Reed's eyes were fixed on a panel.

"Water flow to full." For the first time the colonel made a motion not a part of the routine. One hand raised, and his fingers pressed momentarily against his chin.

"Ready range light on."

There was the briefest of pause. The colonel stepped closer to the nearest panel. This was the captive television screen.

"T minus forty seconds and counting."

Without haste Colonel Reed moved to check for the last time with the engineers operating the control panels. Satisfied, he straightened.

"Pressurization." A faint trace of strain showed in the colonel's voice.

"Go." The voice of the panel engineer was sharp.

"LO₂ tanking."

"Go."

"Water systems."

Spud moistened his lips. He was thinking of Kent up there in the capsule sweating it out, listening in, waiting, bracing himself for the eight G's that would hit him, the increased body weight due to acceleration. He hardly heard the panel operator say "Go." But he did hear Colonel Reed.

“Range operations.”

“Go.”

Spud glanced at the control panel. Every light was on, indicating each major system as ready to go. Spud watched the panel operator's hand lift and move to push a button. This was the last human act necessary for launching Kent into space. For the next eighteen seconds the automatic sequencer would do all of the work. There would be no turning back now, unless Colonel Reed detected some failure and cut off the system.

“T minus twenty seconds and counting.”

Now the panel operators had their eyes on their dials and charts, monitoring information being relayed to them electronically. Colonel Reed's voice went on.

“T minus fifteen seconds and counting.”

Outside the water flow over the flame bucket was at its full force of 35,000 gallons per minute. Eyes watching from the blockhouse were intent upon the silver giant, eyes inside the control room were on panels and on the small viewing screen. Some of the television cameras around the stand were operating. Spud felt a wild urge to leap to his feet and rush outside. He knew this was impossible because the crash doors in the two eight-hundred-foot tunnels were locked. He sat and waited.

“T minus ten seconds and counting.”

“Six, five, four.”

Outside, the last of the cameras had started, ready for the last act.

“Three, two, one.”

The Atlas still stood motionless and lifeless, but the two small vernier engines on its side had come to life.

“Zero.”

Spud felt numb. It did not seem possible that seven hundred and fifty feet away rocket engines had roared into life and were belching great streams of flame. The roaring of those engines did not penetrate the thick walls of the control room. All was quiet, men concentrated on dials and recordings. The clicking of the relays was the only sound in the room. The great bird had not moved because the sequencer was timed to hold the Atlas on the pad momentarily before releasing it. This gave the crew time to make sure everything was operating. Then came word from the periscope observers.

“First motion.”

The arms holding the Atlas on the launching pad had swung back.

“Lift off.” One word with no echo.

Spud’s eyes joined all of the others to watch the television monitors. Colonel Reed had moved so as to get a better view of the Atlas as it slowly rose, its tail of flame and smoke beating down upon the pad. Spud moved in closer and held his breath. Under his breath he muttered, “Go . . . go . . . go.”

Now the Atlas began to pitch over from its vertical flight to take the proper angle for its trip into space. Colonel Reed’s voice broke the tense silence.

“Go, baby, go!” His voice was a shout.

And suddenly everyone, including Spud, was shouting, “Go, baby, go!”

17. SPACE MAN

Kent listened to the countdown inside the control room, and he watched a broadcast on the small TV screen facing him. It was difficult for him to believe that he was not one of the observers in the blockhouse. He was looking at the Atlas and he was hearing Colonel Reed's voice.

He heard nothing after the count reached zero. The blast of the engines and the vibration of the capsule shook every one of his senses. His work with Colonel Dwyer had prepared him for the ordeal to some extent, but the actual experience was shattering. He knew he had to endure it for only a few minutes, so he clung to the few shreds of normalcy left to him. The thought flickered before him that it was lucky he had no part in guiding the Atlas, that all he had to do was to survive until the missile was out of turbulent air and had fired and dropped its rockets.

The MC-2 suit, designed as a suit which could be worn by an astronaut on a moon shoot, helped a great deal, but its chief function was to protect against the inevitable heat during take-off and to provide protection when weightlessness was encountered.

Kent knew when he was on his way, off the pad and soaring upward. The sound of the air outside buffeting the Atlas

was added to the maddening roar of the engines. Kent tried to watch the take-off on the TV screen. He saw a blurred image of the great bird, its lower half hidden by fire and smoke which quickly trailed off into a streaming tail. He winked his eyes and concentrated savagely. The Atlas was fast diminishing in size. After it vanished he still stared at the screen.

Then the forces of acceleration hit him. He fought to remember the pattern as Colonel Dwyer had charted it. For seventy seconds he would be subjected to increasing pressure. His weight would increase from his one-hundred-seventy-pound normal to as much as twelve hundred pounds.

Seventy seconds! It seemed he had already been sitting taking a beating for ten times that long. He was being subjected to transverse G, from chest to back, and that was supposed to be endurable. Well, he was conscious, even though he could no longer see the little TV screen two feet from his face. He knew the MC-2 suit was helping, and so were the straps holding him firmly against the net seat.

Then, suddenly, he knew the seventy seconds had passed and that he was decelerating at 3 G's per second, losing five hundred and ten pounds of weight per second. He tried to grin as the thought came to him that this was taking off weight faster than any patent medicine or pill could do it. He breathed deeply, hoping the oxygen would clear his head. Normal reactions were setting in. The noise had lessened and the weight was gone.

Then the second stage took over, and for fifty seconds his weight mounted until it reached eight hundred and fifty pounds. He moved his hands, raising one and dropping it to

a little table beside the seat. Colonel Dwyer had assured him that he would be able to perform all normal tasks under the acceleration he was feeling. The colonel had been right, though he had not gauged the impact of the noise as added to the weight factor.

Kent suddenly realized that someone was talking to him. An anxious voice was repeating over and over:

“Base B to Scout One. Do you read me?”

Kent moistened his lips and was surprised when his own voice answered.

“Scout One to Base B. I read you clear. Over.”

“Scout One, is everything clear up there? Over.”

“Noisy and lots of G’s. Second dose slackening off. Over.”

Kent recognized the voice from the control room. Colonel Reed was speaking, and he suddenly seemed cheerful.

“Everything is going according to plan. All functions acting right, and you are on course. We’ll keep in touch. Over and out.”

Kent realized two things at almost the same time. The harassing noise had faded away and his faculties were alert, he even felt a sense of exhilaration. He was at once aware of the weightless state of his body. He eased the pressure of his seat belt and knew he was in space, hurtling along at eighteen thousand miles per hour.

No objects floated around inside the small cabin because every item had been designed for space flight. Magnets of suction cups held each in place while clips riveted to tables held charts. He raised his arm and had to use the same effort to lower it that he had used in raising it.

He reached over and pulled a small switch. Instantly he

was cut into the tracking reports coming from Vandenberg. These he must follow carefully. The base was tracking the unidentified space craft as well as his own. Making contact would be a delicate maneuver, with both vehicles moving at about the same speed.

Contact had been plotted carefully. Kent's speed had been matched to the speed of the stranger. He had enough fuel to power maneuvers and to increase or decrease his speed a few thousand miles per hour. He wondered if the stranger had the same ability to maneuver. His superiors had banked upon the belief that the stranger would not be armed against attack but simply would be carrying observation equipment or nuclear pay load.

The tracker below was checking off details. Contact was hours away but he learned that he was on course and would swing across the orbit of the stranger. When that time came, he must maneuver so as to close with the space craft.

Kent knew that the techniques of maneuvering in space were new and untried. He could make no sharp 180-degree turns or steep climbs approaching the vertical. The maneuver would be a sidling, jockeying operation of swinging from one type of ellipse to another. The necessary thrust required must be gauged to a nicety; a bit too much and he'd be out of the park entirely.

Two problems in celestial mechanics were involved. One was a precise check on the flight path of his craft and its relative position regarding the stranger. Vandenberg could render valuable help, but some corrections might be up to him. He knew the exact ellipse pattern of the stranger, and that was a big factor.

Kent turned his head and looked out through the curved and transparent window beside him. He caught his breath. The scene he was looking at had great beauty. The color was intense and light. It was as though a curtain of gauze had been lifted from the sky, leaving it bright and fresh, as though polished. And stars were shining brilliantly. This was an utterly clean world without dust and air to diffuse the atmosphere, perhaps void was a better word, he thought.

A glance at a gauge beside him told him that there was little radiation, but he would have to check regularly because the data charts showed that radiation was found in layers. He had an idea that the stranger was following a course between or below the layers of intense radiation.

Colonel Dwyer had furnished him food, designed to offer protection against radiation, which he had already sampled. There were many things the doctor had anticipated and studied. Kent wondered if he would be able to add a little to that knowledge. He couldn't help but feel that, to a certain extent, the good colonel considered him a human guinea pig.

Kent's eyes rested on the control lever below the wide, curving window. If he opened that window he could float out into space. He could go through it and visit the stranger. He grinned thinly. Would they invite him aboard?

A red light winked on a small panel. Kent switched from the mechanical brain's chatter to radio and heard Reed's voice.

"Base B to Scout One. Do you read me? Over."

"Scout One to Base B. I read you clear. Over."

"Everything progressing smoothly? Over."

“Beautiful world up here. Craft functioning as planned. I’m about to dine. Over.”

Kent heard Reed chuckle. “You’ll have time for dinner. Charts show unknown craft will cross your course in one hour. Stay with tracking station. Over and out.”

Reed’s voice snapped away into the vastness around Kent. He flipped on the tracking station, then prepared to sample a space meal. He hadn’t expected to be hungry, but he was.

Economy of space dictated that everything should be compact and that supplies carried must be in such form that they did not assume large bulk. Kent’s flight was intended to be a short one, but the possibility had to be faced that it might not be short. All important oxygen was carried in pressure bottles. Because not too many units could be carried, the capsule was equipped with a closed oxygen system. Instead of expelling oxygen as a waste gas, Kent’s breath went through a chemical absorber which removed the carbon dioxide. In this way 90 per cent of the original oxygen would be recovered.

Kent’s dinner consisted of a squeeze bottle of orange juice, chopped vegetables, and bite-sized bits of chicken and beef. This was followed by a rather tasteless mixture which Colonel Dwyer had concocted as a protection against radiation. The radiation count was up a little, but not close to the danger point. However, the stuff had to be eaten before radiation was encountered.

Kent was tempted to open a second container of chicken and browned beef, but he didn’t. He might have a long chase ahead of him. If he missed a pass, he’d have to wait for a

second chance. Kent glanced at his watch. In thirty minutes he would go into action.

Tightening his belt, he sat back and waited. He wondered what the strange space craft would look like, what its reaction to having a visitor would be. If it was maneuverable and took after him, he wouldn't have enough fuel to make much of a chase out of it. But then the stranger was probably conserving its fuel. It had been up quite a while and appeared to be intent upon staying up.

The mechanical brain at Vandenberg began feeding Kent exact data: speed of the stranger, exact orbit, almost everything except what it looked like. Kent started to plot his course and set his controls. He calculated the reduction of speed necessary and the maneuver he would make to swing from one ellipse to another. He was intent upon his problem for a few minutes, then reached for a set of controls. He activated a jet with slight backward thrust. That was to reduce his speed. He cut it off quickly, timing the interval exactly by using the stop clock on the panel. Then he eased his directional controls over to the degree his calculations indicated.

This was all new and untried. No pilot in the USAF had ever handled the controls on a space ship in space. The question was: Would they work as the engineers expected and as those controls in the simulators had said they would?

He could not tell if he had actually altered his course until the tracking brain below began to confirm it. He was dealing in thousands of miles and not in yards or blocks, but the brain knew. Or did it? He could see nothing through the curved window, and time was running out.

“Zero . . . zero . . . zero,” the brain chattered.

Kent looked out through the window and saw it. It appeared to be standing still. He was moving up on it. His hand went to the retarding jet control. He wanted to slow to the exact speed of the stranger, float along beside it.

18. THE STRANGER

Kent looked out through the curved window intently. What he saw was a cylindrical object which he judged to be about sixty feet long and about fifteen feet in diameter. It had what appeared to be a stack about three feet in diameter rising from the top. There were a number of circular umbrella-type projections on each side. At what he judged to be the tail a long boom extended ending with a set of fins. The sides seemed to be fitted with windows, especially the forward one-fourth of the craft which appeared to be half glass.

Kent's craft eased alongside less than a hundred feet from the stranger. If there was going to be trouble, it would come now. But he saw no sign of life aboard the craft nor were there any markings to identify it, not even serial numbers. It was of stainless-steel construction and gleamed brightly in the clear, clean void through which it sailed. It seemed that neither craft was moving. They could be suspended in the vacuum of space, dangling there as though on invisible wires.

Then Kent thought he detected movement inside the forward compartment. It was as though someone were scurrying about. At a guess, he felt there could not be a crew of more

than five or six men aboard. But he should have been able to see them moving about if they were men.

Kent frowned, then scowled. The thought that had entered his head was that the crew were little men, men from some other world. That was a fool thought, he told himself. But was it? How much was known about the worlds out in space? If it was possible for him to be up in space, why not creatures from some other planet? Of one thing he was sure. There was life aboard that space ship.

Kent flipped his radio control and barked into his mike. "Scout One calling Base B. Do you read me?"

Colonel Reed's voice came in instantly. "Scout One. We read you clear. Over."

"Have made contact. Flying alongside a space craft. One-hundred-foot interval. Craft appears to be manned. I'd say, manned by midgets. Over."

He heard Reed sputter, "Midgets." Then: "Scout One, I must have failed to read you. Did you say midgets? Over."

"Base B. You read me right. If the moving forms were full-sized men I could see them. The sill of the window in the forward part is about three feet high. All I see is an occasional head bobbing up. Over."

"Scout One. Is there any hostile attitude? Over."

"Base B. No hostile attitude. No attitude at all. Over." Kent was staring at the long, transparent side of the craft. There seemed to be a hatch or door in the nose of the craft. The nose was flat and not pointed.

"Scout One. We need to know what's inside that craft. Any ideas? Over."

“Base B. There’s a hatch in the nose. I can go across and try to have a look inside. Over.”

Colonel Reed hesitated. Then Kent heard Jefferys’ voice: “Jefferys. Have a look. But you have to get back and report what you find.” There was no over, just silence as Jefferys stopped speaking.

Kent studied the odd-looking craft. He was equipped to leave the capsule and return to it. He had reaction guns attached to his body and could navigate backward and forward, and he had plenty of nylon line which would keep him from floating away from his craft into space. He also had the protection of the MC-2 space suit with its bottle of oxygen. The question was, what sort of reception would he get if he was able to open that end door? Opening it might depressurize the ship with fatal results to the crew who might not be equipped with suits such as he was wearing. If he got the door open and popped in fast, there would be little loss of oxygen. But then what?

Kent couldn’t help thinking of ray guns or even plain automatic weapons, though he had an idea the little men would not want to risk puncturing the thin skin of their craft with bullets. That thought decided him. He’d take a chance. If they were going to shoot, they would have opened up on him before now.

Kent unfastened his seat belt and pushed himself erect. The magnets in his soles held him to the floor of the capsule, but he had no way of knowing whether he was standing head down or up, but that didn’t matter. He checked his line and his reaction guns, then slipped an iron pry bar out of a clamp. It felt as weightless as his body felt.

Reaching for the lever which opened the window, he pulled it down. The window opened. There was no rush of air, nothing. He disconnected the craft supply of oxygen and plugged in his suit bottle. What he did had to be done in twenty minutes. The suit bottle had no absorber to reuse the oxygen. When the supply in the bottle was gone, he'd be good for just fifteen seconds before hypotaxia hit him.

Leaving his craft was easy enough. His reaction gun worked just as the engineers had said it would work. The thin nylon line trailed out behind him. Kent floated through space across the hundred feet which separated the two space ships. He remembered as he approached the nose of the stranger that, even though there was no gravity, his impact with that door would be the same as though there was gravity, as great as the mass of his body and the mass of the craft. He used the forward-reaction gun to slow his pace as he neared the door.

In the bright world of space he could see clearly every detail of the door. There was a lever on the outside with a heavy lock through a ring. Kent inserted his bar. He found it difficult to do such a simple thing. Earth forces were not there. This was new. He twisted and saw the lock separate. Then he lifted the lever.

Now was the time for a fast entry. He hesitated and set himself for any sort of surprise. He jerked, but the door did not move. Then he pushed, and it opened. Kent triggered his reaction gun and at the same time he gripped the doorsill and heaved. He was conscious of the iron bar floating beside him. Then he was inside and slamming the door shut. No one shouted at him though there were guttural sounds. Getting his feet set so that the magnets held him, he turned

around slowly, thinking that it was foolish of him to leave the bar outside. It might very well be needed as a weapon.

What he saw was a small room with a ceiling just high enough so that he could stand erect. This he did not notice because he was looking at five creatures. They were helmeted and wore strange harnesses which were attached to panels by what looked like electric cables or cords. He stared at the creatures, then started laughing. Five chimpanzees sat looking at him. There was little curiosity in their dull eyes. The compartment had a strong animal odor even though he was conscious of air currents set in motion by a circulation system.

The chimps had leather shoes and leather pads on the heels of their hands. These would be magnets to keep them from floating free. One of the chimps took a step toward him and halted. It clawed at its stomach, then reached into a bin and pulled out some sort of food which it crammed into its mouth.

Kent realized that he had broken into some sort of space laboratory. The cords tethering the chimps were for recording body reactions. He could see the places where they were attached to the bodies. What baffled him was how signals could be sent giving data without being intercepted. There was a panel close to him. He moved to it. Perhaps here was the answer.

Back of the panel he saw an instrument. What looked like a lens pointed toward the transparent wall. Kent bent forward, and as he stared at the device he remembered talking with an engineer about a new communication system, a sunlight transmission system based upon the old heliograph

principle. Messages sent by the mirror system could not be jammed or intercepted, the engineer had said. Kent stepped back and shook his head. Jefferys' hydrogen bomb had turned out to be a cage of monkeys. He glanced at his watch. He had a four-minute supply of oxygen left, not the safety margin he would have liked.

Kent moved to the door, jerked it open, and pushed through, shutting the door fast. Getting himself headed toward his craft, he started the gun at his back, and moved toward the capsule, pulling in his line to guide him to the open window.

He was halfway across the space when he first felt the dizziness and knew his belt bottle had not had twenty minutes of oxygen. One small factor which had been missed in all of the checking. He could not increase the power of the gun. He had to fight off the feeling he knew would come, the drunken haze, the state of mind which would make him care not at all whether he ever reached the capsule and plugged in the craft's oxygen supply.

Random thoughts began darting through his head. As an experienced jet pilot it was his responsibility to check the oxygen supply in every container. Yes, Jefferys. What about him? No hurry there. Yes, there was. He had to hang on. . . . Tell Jefferys about the chimps.

The window floated toward him. He reached through a dark haze for it. He was inside the capsule and had fallen; no, he couldn't fall, he had pulled himself or his gun had shoved him across the seat. Where was the oxygen connection? He felt blindly with one hand while with the other he worked at the release of the suit bottle.

A golden glow surrounded him. He was floating off to another world. It was a wonderful feeling. Then his head began to clear. He sucked deep, dragging in oxygen. At first he made no attempt to right himself. He just breathed deeply and lay still.

Finally Kent stirred. He shut off the gun at his back. His head was clear as he righted himself. His strength was back. He closed the window and fastened his seat belt. Then he reached for the radio switch and spoke into the mike.

"Scout One calling Base B. Scout One calling Base B. Do you read me, Base B?"

Colonel's Reed's voice came in. "Base B. We read you clear, Scout One. Over."

"Scout One wishes to report to Colonel Jefferys," Kent said crisply.

Jefferys came on. "Jefferys, Scout One. Over."

Kent grinned. "Scout One reporting to Colonel Jefferys. Have boarded space craft. Craft contains five chimpanzees. Space lab. Over."

Kent heard a grunt from Jefferys, then almost a roar. "This is no time for jokes. What about the bomb?"

Kent waited and, when Jefferys did not clear, he said, "That is exactly what I found. A sunlight communications system is being used to transmit data so there is no way to intercept reports. Over."

Jefferys came over. "It had to be checked," he said lamely.

Kent waited a space, then said, "What I can't understand is all the sabotage to keep us from finding out about those monkeys. Over."

Jefferys answered promptly. "They were bluffing, trying

to panic us into any deal they had up their sleeves, like the admission of Red China to the U.N. Had to keep us from finding out what the score was. You coming down.”

Kent waited. “I’m coming down as soon as I check with Reed’s boys.”

19. RE-ENTRY

Kent eased the capsule into earth orbit and gave his attention to his charts. He had passed out of Vandenberg's area of tracking and was on his own, streaking around the earth, which looked very much like the globes he had known in school except for the color. His orbit time was one hour and fifteen minutes.

The capsule was rotating, but Kent was not aware of it. This motion compensated for the intense cold on the side away from the sun. Soon the earth looked dark, a black disc. Down on that side it was night.

Re-entry posed some very definite problems. It had been accomplished with capsules which carried only instruments. In such cases the landing was on an ocean. With a pilot aboard, the capsule would make a ground landing. Kent wondered how close he could come to Vandenberg. He didn't dare fall short or he'd land in the Pacific Ocean. Traveling at high speed would make any field landing such as was used by the X-15 difficult, even on a big area such as Rogers Dry Lake and Andrews AFB. But he wouldn't need a runway. He'd make the final descent by parachute.

The space ship was ten feet high and seven feet across at the base. It was designed to take some shock upon landing.

Hitting a rocky mountaintop might be too much of a jar. A forest would be bad. He shrugged his shoulders. A lot of things needed working out before men took to flying in and out of space as a routine maneuver.

The capsule spun on, and presently his tracking station came in. Kent switched to radio and called in.

"Scout One to Base B. Scout One to Base B. Do you read me? Over."

He repeated the call three times before getting his base.

"Base B to Scout One. We get you clear. Over."

"Scout One to Base B. I'm coming in. Over."

"Base B to Scout One. Tracking station has you. Over."

Kent switched to the mechanical brain and listened to the data the ground men broadcast after checking data received. Kent followed the stream of information. His hand moved to the controls of the retarding rockets which would slow his speed for entering the earth's atmosphere.

The retarding rockets fired, but Kent could not feel any change at all. The tracking station noted the change, however, and relayed the information to him. Then aerodynamic forces, air, and gravity began to drag. Buffeting told him he was plunging through the earth's atmosphere. The G forces started to build, and he fought them. He must keep his mind clear and his body fit.

Kent's eyes were on the dials giving him his altitude. He was still far too high to use the parachutes. Then Vandenberg cut in. Kent switched to radio. Data from the trackers was useless now.

"Base B to Scout One. Do you read me? Over."

"Scout One to Base B. I read you clear. Over."

"You are overshooting, Scout One. Can you release parachutes? Over."

"Scout One to Base B. No second approach with this thing. Am releasing parachutes. Over."

Kent reached for the parachute release bar. A few seconds after he pulled the bar he felt the tug of the parachutes. He wondered how much braking force they had at such an altitude. Looking down from the window, he saw the earth, gray and indistinct, spreading below him. There was nothing to do but wait.

Presently he noticed that the earth suddenly had color. Patches below looked green. Experience told him he was not more than ten thousand feet up, and his altimeter verified this.

The capsule descended slowly, buoyed up by the big parachutes above it. Kent peered down, wondering where he was going to land. There was a town to his right and farms or ranches were directly below. There were also ragged hills with timbered slopes. No use to worry, but he could speculate.

The capsule settled toward earth and Kent could see a man on a tractor out in a field. Cars were passing on a highway. But he had no idea where he was. Now the ground was very close. Looking up, he spotted a helicopter moving in. It had Air Force markings. The boys had trailed him right down.

Kent felt a jolt, then another, and the capsule came to rest. Before he could look out billows of fabric settled over the window. There was no wind stirring and the nylon had settled on the space ship.

Kent opened the window. He released his seat belt, and started to heave himself out of the ship, clawing aside the parachute. The nylon fell away when he was halfway out of the capsule, and he saw a house some fifty feet from him. Two boys stood staring at the capsule. When Kent appeared they shouted and raced toward the house.

Kent stood on the ground and started working to get off his helmet. A woman appeared at the back door of the house, and stood there for a moment before whirling and vanishing. Kent grinned. He was sure that the local authorities would be receiving a report that a man from Mars had landed in this family's back yard. He was struggling with the pressure suit when the helicopter settled down beside him.

The instant the 'copter landed, Spud Murphy's head popped out of a hatch. "You made it!" he bellowed, and started to scramble to the ground.

Jefferys and Major Pender alighted. They moved forward behind Spud, who was charging to meet Kent. They shook hands, and Spud pounded Kent on the back.

"Boy, are you the bird man!" he said with a broad grin.

"Good work," Jefferys said, and extended his hand.

"Have a rough ride?" Pender asked.

"Just monkey business," Kent answered. He turned to Spud. "Help me ease this thing up a bit."

"Got stuff aboard. I'll help you up," Spud said.

Two airmen wearing sidearms had climbed down and stood close to the capsule. They would guard it until it could be brought in.

"How much did I miss the base?" Kent asked.

“Only a hundred miles. That’s why we came by ’copter,” Spud explained.

They were standing at the foot of the ladder. Jefferys said, “Some trouble brewing in Florida. We’ll discuss it after you get dressed.”

Kent stared at the colonel. Jefferys was treating his flight as though he had just made a hop between bases. “Don’t I get a couple of days off?” He tried to keep sarcasm out of his voice.

“Two days,” Jefferys said shortly. It was clear he was annoyed at such a waste of time.

“Thanks, sir,” Kent said, and started up the ladder.



RUTHERFORD MONTGOMERY

Born and raised in North Dakota, Rutherford Montgomery switched his allegiance to Colorado when he spent three years at Western State there. Remaining in Colorado, he taught school, served six years as judge of a court of record and three years as state Budget Commissioner. Twenty years ago, he moved his home to California and devoted his full time to writing.

Mr. Montgomery's more than sixty books have grown out of his hobbies, jobs and interests. His interest in outdoor life has led to many books on wild life and animals, such as *BEAVER WATER*, *WAPITI THE ELK*, *IN HAPPY HOLLOW*, and *KLEPTY*. His World War I service in the U.S. Army Air Corps has resulted in many air combat books, including *JETS AWAY*; *TOM PITTMAN, USAF*; *WAR WINGS*, and the Kent Barstow series of which *KENT BARSTOW: SPACE MAN* is the latest.

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